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India-US Defence Relations: Time for a Rethink

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SYNOPSIS

*India is at a strategic juncture when it needs to grasp the opportunity to build a close military linkage with the United States. **RAJESH BASRUR** and **MRIGANIKA SINGH TANWAR** call for a shift to avoid missing the bus a second time.*

COMMENTARY

Over the past year, there has been considerable debate in India over the extent to which the country should place its strategic eggs in the American basket. Much of the discussion reflects a lack of substance and an abundance of confused thinking. There are just three key questions Indian policymakers need to consider. First, is India facing a rising threat? The answer to this is easy: no one can seriously dispute that increasingly contentious borders with China and Pakistan constitute an unprecedented and, in the first case, a rapidly rising threat. The second question is more troubling: is Indian policy conducive to tackling the threat efficaciously? Quite clearly not, otherwise the answer to the first query would be different.

The third and currently urgent question is: why is Indian policy sub-optimal? In our view, this is primarily because it rests on faulty premises – and not for the first time. India's capacity to attain enhanced security is limited and requires much closer military ties with the United States. Let us look critically at the pros and cons of such a linkage.



India's policy remains sub-optimal and requires closer defence ties with the United States for enhanced security. However, India will need to shed some historical baggage to forge closer military links.

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Discarding the Historical Baggage

Indian strategic thinking is unduly held back by hangovers from the past. The predominant concern in New Delhi is an enduring fascination with “strategic autonomy”. For a weak India under Nehruvian stewardship, the term underlined the desire to get away from the colonial past; for a rising India today, this matters much less. The greater its military and economic prowess, the less it needs to worry about the pitfalls of a close linkage with the United States.

Post-independent India imagined itself a great power in the making, but the war with China taught it a lesson it has not yet learnt. Hence, Indian leaders continue to be preoccupied with the same concern: on the one hand, they want India to be a “leading power”; on the other, they do not have the capacity to do it on their own and are yet overly cautious about taking the most cost-efficient path to the goal. If anything, Indian reluctance and the slow process of strengthening strategic bonds have led Washington to widen its options by pulling its Atlantic and Indo-Pacific alliances together into AUKUS, while the four-nation Quadrilateral Security Dialogue lacks strategic heft owing to India’s coyness about building strong military ties.

What are the possible obstacles to stronger military ties? India has bitter memories of being subjected to American sanctions, particularly over its once-covert nuclear programme. But that was at a time when India was relatively weak, which is hardly the case now. The sanctions imposed after India’s nuclear tests in 1998 were quickly dropped and, by 2008, the United States had altered its own domestic laws and persuaded the nonproliferation regime to [obliquely recognise India’s nuclear-armed status](#).

A second argument against an alliance-like arrangement involves the Indian fear of “entrapment”: of being dragged into a conflict between the United States and China, or being unwittingly pulled into American intervention in a third country. Such worries again reflect a lingering insecurity rooted in India’s weak past. American allies like France managed to stay out of the US-led Iraq war of 2003. Moreover, the entrapment

problem works both ways: the United States would also face the same risk. On the other hand, if an India-US neo-alliance (whatever it may look like) does not materialise, India risks returning to the isolation of 1962 (against China) and 1991 (post-Soviet disintegration).

Other Indo-US differences from the Cold War era have disappeared or are dissipating in a changing world. India no longer objects to the giant US military base in Diego Garcia or calls for the Indian Ocean to be designated a “zone of peace” by the United Nations. In the past, New Delhi and Washington differed sharply on Israel; today, they form a close nexus of defence cooperation. The expanding network of the I2U2 (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, United States), which is reshaping the Middle Eastern landscape, is so far confined to non-military cooperation, but is set to build a “[long-term strategic partnership](#).” Although Pakistan was long a source of tension between India and the United States, the problem has subsided since Washington decided to “de-hyphenate” the subcontinent and prioritise India. In short, there are no serious obstacles to a much-tightened India-US military-strategic linkage. Russia remains a sticky issue, but we know that India’s major purchases of Russian oil are not intolerable to the United States or Europe since they [keep the price of oil relatively stable and Russian profits low](#).

Potential Gains

Relations with China remain a problem for both India and the United States, but no one wants war – all three are nuclear-armed states with an abiding interest in war avoidance. But India and the United States do stand to gain by coordinating their approaches in important ways. New Delhi has benefited substantially from US intelligence on the China border. Future gains accruing from a closer strategic linkage would be those associated with “grey zone” or “[indirect strategy](#)” conflicts: shared intelligence, technical cooperation on military cyber capabilities, enhanced logistics and related best practices. Secondly, a strong military relationship would facilitate India’s acquisition of sophisticated military equipment. US firms need not worry about the negative effects of technology transfer. Joint ventures will actually *expand* the market for global sales of their military equipment by significantly lowering costs.

Coordinated domain awareness based on advanced technology vis-à-vis the maritime domain is another prospect worth developing. An integrated regime of weapons development, patrols and intelligence sharing would further bolster India’s maritime security, including areas such as preventing the cutting of marine cables and the deployment of autonomous military vehicles. Technology for detecting submarines operating at deep-sea levels has also improved significantly. China is moving swiftly forward on this and India will not be able to match it without collaborating with the United States.

Conclusion

Why would the United States want India as a serious strategic partner? Is India a [bad strategic bet](#)? Some argue that the United States is an [unmatched power](#) that none (meaning China) would be able to compete with in the foreseeable future. Not quite. While still the predominant power, the United States is unquestionably in long-term relative decline. A quick [comparison drawn from World Bank data](#) shows that the US

share of world GDP (in constant 2015 US\$) dropped from 28.42% in 2000 to 23.62% in 2021, while that of China in the same years rose from 5.73% to 18.19%. Although India carries much potential for accelerated growth, its share of world GDP, far behind at 1.65% and 3.13%, respectively, has a long way to go before catching up. True, [American military spending remains far above all other states](#). Currently, America's defence budget constitutes 64.5% of the world's five largest defence budgets (the other four being those of China, Russia, India and Germany), but this apparent advantage is offset by two factors. First, military power "balances" have serious limitations when nuclear weapons constrain war making; and second, US spending is distributed across global commitments, a factor that does not apply to the others.

Over time, the United States will need stronger links with a growing India to rationalise its costs. India needs the United States for boosting its capabilities in the military technologies identified above. Hanging on to "multi-alignment", a regurgitated version of nonalignment, will not bring security. The real path to enhanced security and major power status is through military-technological capabilities, which only the United States can provide. To this end, deeper security commitments and the resultant trust are essential. Both nations stand to gain over time. In the future, it would make sense to share the burden of maintaining order in the Indo-Pacific by gradually moving to a division of labour. The United States could focus primarily on the Pacific, while India concentrates on the Indian Ocean. Now is an opportune moment that should have been grasped long ago. Under Nehru, India missed the strategic bus; today, it is on the slow train. It is time to change to the fast track.

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