THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA-US RELATIONS AND INDIA’S GRAND STRATEGY

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Abstract:
The evolution of India-US relations and India’s grand strategy over the past two decades is a result of changing power balances and an affirmation of structural realism. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of unipolarity opened the way for the US superpower to engage with India and for New Delhi to move away from Moscow and towards a partnership with Washington while maintaining an autonomous grand strategy of a rising power. In the past two decades, China’s rise as a major power in Asia has introduced propelled the partnership. Domestic politics also has played a role in the growing partnership, with the growth of capitalism and nationalism and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a dominant political force. These factors have driven interest in the US partnership to counter China and its growing partnerships in South Asia and the spectre of encirclement.

Key words: Grand strategy, Strategic Partnership, Structural Realism, Non-alignment, Major powers.

Título en Castellano: La evolución de las relaciones entre la India y Estados Unidos y la gran estrategia de la India

Resumen:
La evolución de las relaciones entre India y Estados Unidos y la gran estrategia de la India en las últimas dos décadas son el resultado del cambio de los equilibrios de poder y de una reafirmación del realismo estructural. El final de la guerra fría y el surgimiento de la unipolaridad abrieron el camino para que la superpotencia estadounidense se involucrase con la India y para que Nueva Delhi se alejarse de Moscú e iniciase una asociación con Washington manteniendo una gran estrategia autónoma propia de un poder ascendente. En las últimas dos décadas, el ascenso de China como gran potencia en Asia ha impulsado esta asociación. La política doméstica también ha desempeñado un papel en la creciente asociación, con el crecimiento del capitalismo y el nacionalismo y el ascenso del Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) como una fuerza política dominante. Estos factores han impulsado el interés por la asociación con Estados Unidos para contrarrestar a China, sus crecientes alianzas en Asia meridional y el espectro de un cerco.

Palabras Clave: Gran estrategia, Asociación estratégica, Realismo estructural, No-alineamiento, Potencias principales.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, India and the US have drawn increasingly closer due largely to common concerns about the rise of China and its growing assertiveness in Asia. At the same time, India’s grand strategy has evolved from a non-aligned stance and dependence on Russia for its weapons purchases towards one of an emerging great power which seeks to counter encirclement and territorial infringement by China and Pakistan and has consolidated a partnership with the US. For its part, the US has moved away from its engagement with Beijing and “major non-NATO alliance” with Pakistan and towards a strategy of quadrilateral cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia to contain China and its partners. In this developing arrangement, the US is looking to India as its most important long-term partner.

The Asian strategic landscape is best understood through structural realist theory, with a largely anarchic system and a looming power transition between China, which is overtaking the US and its allies and partners and which is becoming more assertive in challenging the decades-old status quo in the region. The growing US-India strategic partnership comes at a time in which Asia is moving from the unipolar moment of the last two decades and towards multipolarity. The US has declined in relative power in Asia, especially since the financial crisis of 2008, while China and India have gained in power and influence. US efforts to maintain unipolarity in the region are increasingly challenged, especially when China and other countries are pursuing their national interests on their own continent. Also, Russia has been moving towards a closer relationship with China, partly in opposition to the US rebalance to Asia. Japan is moving to adopt a more assertive defense and security stance, as it faces an increasing challenge from China, which has led to confrontation. In contrast, the US must continue to play an “away game” in Asia and depend on allies in Japan, Australia, and South Korea and partners, such as India, to help maintain a presence and influence on the continent.

Power balancing appears to be the primary, workable way to maintain order and stability in Asia in the face of a rising power like China. Realists contend that the way to deter a rising power from aggression is either through alliances or partnerships with greater or equal power than the rising power and its allies and partners. In Asia, a number of security ties have been

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2 The opinions expressed in this research report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of the US Air War College, the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US Government branch
formed, which provide the basis for balancing, the potentially most important in the long term is the emerging quadrilateral security arrangement.

An issue is how the India-US relationship will develop with increasing multipolarity in Asia. The growing economic influence of China and India’s desire to pursue an autonomous grand strategy will mean that India is unlikely to form an alliance with the US. However, the threat of encirclement and China’s encroachment in the Himalayas has meant that India’s partnership with the US has strengthened in the defense and strategic realms. In an emerging multipolar Asia, the question is how much China’s increasingly assertive behavior might compel the US and India towards forging an even stronger relationship. The relationship that is developing among China and the US and India will be a highlight of Asian security this century.

2. Evolution of India-US Relations and India’s Grand Strategy before 2001

For more than four decades, the Cold War and bipolarity defined US-India relations, even though the two countries were the two largest democracies and shared many values. In constructing a containment wall around the Soviet Union, the US found a willing candidate in Pakistan – India’s arch-rival. From 1954 to 1990, the US formed and maintained an alliance with Pakistan and developed suspicions of India’s relations with the Soviet Union and grand strategy of strategic autonomy and socialist economic development. As for India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru led in forming the Non-Aligned Movement and distanced the country from the US and its containment system. The brief exception happened in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the US supported India against what was seen as aggression from the People’s Republic of China, particularly during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. The relationship declined in the late 1960s and hit a low during the war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Starting in March 1971, the US leaned towards Pakistan, even though its military committed massive human rights abuses in its fight to prevent the eastern wing of the country from becoming the dominant political force and subsequently attempting to break away and become Bangladesh. In August, India responded to US support for Pakistan by signing a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, which signaled a shift away from non-alignment and increasing dependence on Moscow for arms supplies. In December, India intervened against Pakistan on behalf of Bengali militias, and the US responded by sending the USS Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal, which created an international outcry. In 1972, the

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US forged a quasi-alliance with China against the Soviet Union, which meant that the US-China-Pakistan axis was given greater concrete form and as a result pushed India closer to the Soviet Union and further from the US.

The US and its allies singled out India in the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that came into force in 1970. The US and other nuclear weapons states accepted China as a nuclear state under the NPT, because it had tested in 1964, even though it was viewed as a potential proliferator of nuclear materials and technology. India had a nuclear weapons program in the 1960s but did not test, because it concurred with the emerging nonproliferation regime and wanted nuclear explosions to serve peaceful purposes. However, when India decided to conduct what it called a “peaceful nuclear test” in 1974, the US and its allies protested. In 1978, the US Congress and the Carter administration enacted the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act, which led to the cutoff of nuclear fuel supplies to India.\(^{15}\)

The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 led the US to lean more towards Pakistan and distance itself further from India. The US protested against the 1977 military coup of General Zia ul Haq and the execution of Prime Minister Zulifkar Ali Bhutto in 1979 but soon welcomed Zia’s tougher position against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The US initially sanctioned both Pakistan and India for their nuclear weapons programs but waived punishment of Pakistan in 1981. The Reagan administration acquiesced as Zia relied on Islamists (many of them jihadi extremists) in mounting resistance against the Soviet occupation. The US also turned a blind eye as Zia implemented a strategy of training jihadists and promoting terrorism as an asymmetrical weapon against India. Also, the US disapproved of India’s recognition of the pro-Soviet Najibullah regime in Kabul, and India disapproved of US support for Zia’s strategy.

The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union created the conditions for realignment in Asia and opened the door to India-US rapprochement and the eventual formation of the strategic partnership. In 1989, the Chinese Communist Party and People’s Liberation Army’s decision to crush pro-democracy protestors signaled an end to the quasi-alliance and to the US beginning to see a rising China as a potential strategic competitor. In 1990, the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan based on the 1985 Pressler Amendment, cutting off aid because of its nuclear weapons program. In 1991, Finance Minister Manhoman Singh led in instituting major economic reforms, which began the transformation of India’s socialist economic system, created the basis for freer markets and increased foreign investment, and drew India closer to the US-dominated global economic system. The opening of the Indian economy featured advances in economic growth and development of the service and industrial sectors, while encountering problems in opening up the agricultural and retail sectors and difficulties in reassuring the majority of the population who depend on farming and forms of government support and protection for their existence.

India’s grand strategy began to change during the 1990s with the rise of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party challenged the Congress Party, which had dominated Indian governments since 1947, and its more idealist (or “Nehruvian”) grand strategy of strategic autonomy, nonalignment, and internationalism (e.g. support for the United Nations and peacekeeping).\(^{16}\) The BJP’s Hindu-oriented nationalism was more realist and mainly


concerned with increasing India’s power and countering the Pakistan-China alliance. The BJP rejected socialism and moved to energize the Indian economy and bring private sector companies into the development of India’s defense industries. In 1998, the BJP came to power and followed through on its promises to test nuclear weapons and move towards making India a recognized nuclear weapons state and a great power. Consequently, India developed a new (unpublished) grand strategy that aimed to take advantage of its rising national power, while developing its nuclear weapons program and maintaining a credible minimal deterrent.  

During the 1990s, the US treated India and Pakistan as equals, particularly when it came to their nuclear weapons programs and the issue of Kashmir. This was in spite of the fact that Pakistan had become a state sponsor of terrorism, especially in Kashmir, as well as a nuclear proliferator and was postured to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for a wide range of Indian conventional actions. Even so, the US urged India to consider holding a plebiscite in Kashmir to determine its future and did not discriminate between the nuclear behavior of India and Pakistan in cajoling both countries to join the NPT and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as non-nuclear weapons states. When India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in May-June 1998, the US sanctioned both countries. However, with Pakistan’s launching of the Kargil War in 1999 and continuing support for violent extremists, the US distanced itself further from Islamabad. Negotiations between Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott led the Clinton Administration to come to an understanding regarding India’s positions on counterterrorism and its non-aggressive nuclear posture and lift most economic sanctions in November 1998. In addition, India’s growing economic power served to attract US policymakers. President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in 2000 signaled a shift towards acknowledging New Delhi as a potential great power that was further developed by the administration of President George W. Bush.

2.1. The Strategic Partnership, 2001-2009 and India’s Developing Grand Strategy

In 2001, the Bush administration came to power with a more realist orientation than the Clinton administration towards Asia. The Bush policy included a dualist approach of economic engagement with China as well as balancing against its rise. Under the leadership of US Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill and his advisor, Ashley Tellis, the US de-hyphenated its India-Pakistan policy and began to treat India as a potential partner to balance against a rising China. From 2001-4, the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Vajpayee worked with the Bush administration to forge the strategic partnership. In September 2001, the US lifted military and residual economic sanctions.

US overtures and India’s growing self-assurance led it to join the coalition against terrorism after the 11 September 2001 attacks, provide US forces with over-flight and port rights, and offer basing rights in the struggle against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. New Delhi offered cooperation, partly because the US was fighting many of the same adversaries that India was. However, in October 2001 Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf preempted India by offering the US over-flight, transit and basing rights in his country. US entry into the region led to the end of a Taliban regime that was hostile to India and put pressure on Pakistan to diminish support for anti-Indian terrorism in Kashmir. In November 2001, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke of the US and India as “natural allies” and reiterated his support for Bush’s “Global War on Terror”. In deference to the US and its dependence on Pakistan for access to

Afghanistan, India refrained from providing substantial military assistance to the government of President Mohamed Karzai that was established in 2002.

After the Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001 and India’s mobilization and posting of 700,000 troops on the Line of Control and Pakistan border, India threatened but did not launch offensive operations and even refrained from “limited conventional war” actions. During 2002, the US exerted considerable pressure to forestall an Indian punitive attack against Pakistani forces and terrorist camps. US war gaming analysis indicated that any Indian limited conventional warfare action would spiral into nuclear war. The Indian government was uncertain of the threshold that would set off a Pakistan nuclear strike. India did not possess the capabilities (especially attack helicopters) to undertake low-risk “limited conventional warfare actions”, such as raiding terrorist bases and quickly returning to India. As an alternative, India maintained a military strategy of attrition, hoping that Pakistan would be unable to sustain a large military presence along the Line of Control. US efforts to resolve the 2002 crisis and support of India’s position against terrorism in Kashmir helped pave the way for increased India-US cooperation. In 2002, India began to engage in a regional security dialogue with the US and fostered greater understanding of India’s concerns. These included India’s concerns about Pakistan’s state sponsorship of terrorism and destabilization of Kashmir as well as New Delhi’s policy towards the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka between the Tamil Tigers and government forces, in which India favored devolution of some powers to the Tamil minority.

US-India cooperation in the war on terror and on regional issues helped pave the way for the 2004 “Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership” and cooperation in the areas of nuclear energy, high technology, and space, as well as missile defense and other military matters. Indian and US interests were converging in South Asia, while the US remained focused on fighting the war on terror in Afghanistan and cajoling Pakistan to counter the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network in North Waziristan. The US recognized the significance of the partnership, as well as India’s regional leadership and hegemony in South Asia and its democracy and increasingly dynamic economy as positive forces. The partnership and India’s rapid economic growth was paving the way for New Delhi to assert leadership over a region that was striving to become less known for disputes and more adaptable to globalization and democratization.

In May 2004, the Congress Party and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won the general election, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and formed a UPA government. Even

21 Cordesman, Anthony S.: The India-Pakistan Military Balance, Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, (May 2002). According to Cordesman, India lacked attack helicopters and other airborne assault capabilities to effectively counter Pakistan armed forces.
though India’s foreign policy under the UPA had shifted to the left, he was determined to continue the strategic partnership, especially in regard to civilian nuclear cooperation. In March 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the Bush administration’s intention to assist India to become “a global power.” In June 2005, New Delhi and Washington negotiated the New Framework in the India-US Defense Relationship, which charted a more ambitious course in joint exercises, transfer of technology, counterterrorism, and other areas. One result was that the India military began to hold more joint exercises with the US military than with the military of any other country with the holding of several exercises every year. Also, by 2008, the US became the biggest exporter of defense equipment to India, and India has subsequently bought billions of dollars’ worth of US military hardware.

The efforts of the Bush administration and UPA government to negotiate and enact a civilian nuclear agreement, in which the US recognized India as a de facto nuclear weapons state that did not proliferate, constituted the major step in striving to make India a great power. After three years of negotiation and an arduous political process, the Bush administration and the newly powerful US “India lobby” were able to secure congressional ratification of the “nuclear deal” in 2008. The nuclear deal ended thirty years of nuclear sanctions against India, opened India’s nuclear market to US and other nuclear exporters, and heralded a new stage in India’s foreign policy. The deal elevated India to the level of the other five declared nuclear weapons states, which had long led the nonproliferation regime and which discouraged other states from exploiting commerce in nuclear materials and power plants to develop weapons. The US lifted sanctions against trade with India in nuclear equipment and materials, with the justification that India had established a good nonproliferation record that would not imperil the NPT.

The nuclear deal and the US-India strategic partnership signaled the achievement of the Bush administration in working with India to help it emerge as a major power which would be more strategically assertive in Asia. For some Bush administration officials and advisors, they had taken major steps towards enlisting India in countering the rapid rise of China as a strategic competitor and eventually forming an alliance. However, for some US policymakers, the protracted three year process of India ratifying the nuclear deal amply demonstrated that India was still hampered by a byzantine political system and bureaucracy. Also, some US observers found that Indian leaders lacked “strategic vision” and assertiveness to develop the capabilities to be a major partner, much less a potential ally. The US-India partnership raised questions as

27 The New Framework in the India-US Defense Relationship, signed by the Defence Minister of India and the US Secretary of Defense on 28 June 2005 charted a course for defense relations. Under the New Framework, India and the US agreed to: a) Conduct joint and combined exercises and exchanges; b) Collaborate in multinational operations if it is in common interest; c) Strengthen capabilities of militaries to promote security and defeat terrorism; d) Promote regional and global peace and stability; e) Enhance capabilities to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; f) Increase opportunities for technology transfer, collaboration, co-production, and research and development; g) Expand collaboration relating to missile defense; h) Strengthen abilities of the Armed Forces to respond quickly to disasters, including in combined operations; i) Conduct successful peacekeeping operations; and j) Conduct and increase exchanges of intelligence.
29 Kessler, Glenn (2007): The Confidante, New York, MacMillan, p. 49. In March 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that the United States intended to help India become a “great power”. On 7 July 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described India as an “emerging global power”.
to how India would take advantage of US diplomacy and the partnership to expand its presence on the world stage.

President Barack Obama continued the Bush administration’s partnership with India and in November 2009 declared the US “natural allies” because of their shared free market-democratic values and “core goal of achieving peace and security for all peoples in the Asian region”. In April 2009, President Obama in his Prague speech expressed the aspiration of eventually eliminating all nuclear weapons. Subsequently, India participated in the Obama administration’s “nuclear security initiative” to prevent violent extremists from obtaining nuclear materials. Also, India responded to the nuclear deal by continuing its unilateral nuclear testing moratorium that began after its nuclear tests in May 1998. As part of proving that it would be a good nonproliferation partner, New Delhi voted in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meetings in 2005 and 2009 against Iran’s lack of transparency in its nuclear program. India worked with the US in efforts to start negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) and a nuclear weapons convention. Washington and New Delhi cooperated to try to realize India’s intention of joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement on nuclear export controls, and the Australia Group on chemical and biological export controls. While India was able to finally join the MTCR and the Wassenaar Arrangement in 2017 and the Australia Group in 2018, China has continued to block the country’s NSG membership in order to prevent India from rising in power and prestige.

2.2 A Pause in the Strategic Partnership, 2009-2014, and the US Pivot to Asia

After a remarkable period of growth in the US-India partnership from 2001 to 2009, crowned by the 2008 civilian nuclear agreement, relations settled on a plateau. The relationship slowed after the Congress Party won reelection in 2009 and formed a UPA government for a second term. After 2009, the party and government drifted leftward towards its Nehruvian roots, which dominated Indian foreign policy from 1947 to the 1990s and which held that India should maintain strategic autonomy from the US. In the Congress Party, there was a divide between an anti-American wing that clashes with more accommodating centrists. The Defense Minister A.K. Antony was seen by many as part of the non-aligned wing and the leading figure in the slowing of defense cooperation with the US. In addition, the Indian bureaucracy remained small and slow-moving, Nehruvian in orientation, and reluctant to change India’s traditional foreign

32 “U.S.-India Partnership: The Fact Sheets,” The White House, 8 November 2010. In November 2010, the US and India signed a memorandum of understanding that provides a general framework for cooperative activities in working with India’s Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership, which India announced at the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit.
33 Zerbo, Lassina: “Action Needed to Ratify the 1996 Test Ban Treaty,” International Disarmament Network, 28 February 2018. 183 states have signed and 166 ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) out of 195 states. For the treaty to enter into force, ratification is required from the so-called Annex 2 States. Of these, China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and the US, have yet to ratify the CTBT.
34 Bagchi, Irani: “India supports Iran’s presidency of the Conference on Disarmament,” Times of India, 17 June 2013. Newly inaugurated Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was elected president of the conference, and the US delegation walked out.
35 “India calls for starting negotiations for FMCT,” IndlawNews, 19 June 2013. However, the FMCT has continued to be blocked by Pakistan and China, because China has been pushing for a space weapons treaty (PAROS) in part to counter US space capabilities.
Another issue was US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy to South Asia, who initially tried to include Kashmir as an issue in his efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan and Pakistan, which caused a negative reaction in New Delhi. Finally, India was concerned about the Obama administration’s apparent prioritizing of the strategic and economic dialogue with China over advancing the strategic partnership. However, India was also engaged with China in an effort to attract investment and infrastructure and seek cooperation in Asian affairs. India’s efforts were manifested in seeking membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS and its New Development Bank, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

On the military front, India decided not to purchase US F-16 or F/A-18E/F medium multirole combat aircraft (MMRCA) in 2011. The purchase of American fighters could have marked a step forward in interoperability between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and US Air Force (USAF) and in overall relations. However, some Indian leaders and defense officials appeared to equate the purchase of US combat aircraft and the prospect of USAF-IAF interoperability with alliance formation and were dissatisfied with the amount of technology transfer that the US would allow. Instead, India decided to start the purchase of French Dassault Rafale fighters, which soon ran into difficulties, and to date the IAF has not received a single airplane.

In November 2011, the Obama administration announced its “pivot” or “rebalance to “Asia” partly over concerns that China was shifting from its “peaceful rise” grand strategy to a more assertive one. In the announcement, the US reaffirmed its commitment to the US-India strategic partnership. The Department of Defense prominently emphasized India’s potential leading role in the DOD’s 2012 Strategic Guidance: “US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia to the Indian Ocean region and South Asia…The US is also investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to be a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean.” The guidance made it explicit that the US viewed India as the southwestern cornerstone of its strategic rebalancing towards Asia. In focusing on India, the Obama administration was building upon the Bush administration’s 2001 opening to India, the 2004 next steps in the strategic partnership, and the 2008 civilian nuclear energy agreement in which the US recognized India as a legitimate nuclear energy state that also possessed nuclear weapons but had not acceded to the NPT.

The government of Prime Minister Manohman Singh reacted cautiously to the pivot and to US appeals for a closer relationship. Nehruvians in the UPA government were wary that the US

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37 Markey, Daniel: “Developing India’s Foreign Policy Software”, Asia Policy, nº 74 (July 2009), pp. 73-96.
38 BRICS is an acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.
39 Clinton, Hillary: “America’s Pacific Century,” Foreign Policy, 11 October 2011, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century. In the article Secretary of State Clinton refers to the “pivot” to Asia. The term was later changed to “rebalance”.
rebalance would bring intensified pressures for an elevated partnership and an alliance with the US. To many Indian observers, the “pivot” to Asia meant increased US and allied efforts to contain China. To many American observers, the US needed India to thwart China’s ultimate goal of pushing the US out of Asia in order to make the region safe for Chinese hegemony. Under the Obama administration, the rebalance to Asia emphasized diplomatic and economic instruments of power to avoid alarming Chinese leaders. However, the US defense establishment was also preparing for an eventual military confrontation. At the same time, the Obama administration hoped to manage the rise of China and develop a long-term partnership and share leadership of the Asian order with India and China.

In 2012 and 2013, the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, worked with the Indian government on issues of weapons procurement, technology transfer and local production of US weapon systems – the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). India wanted to see more US technology transfer and production of US defense items inside the country. Greater US technology transfer and local production were seen as measures that would strengthen the partnership, while not provoking China. However, progress was slow due to bureaucratic and political barriers on both the Indian and US sides. For some Indian observers, the relationship between US and India was seen to be a “transactional partnership” in which the US was continually trying to sell India military hardware with no benefit to the Indian economy. Carter returned to these security cooperation efforts in 2015 and 2016 as Secretary of Defense, and DTTI has become an important part of the partnership.

2.3 The Modi Government and Revival of the Strategic Partnership

The May 2014 general election landslide for the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi led to a reassertion of Indian nationalism and reinvigoration of the strategic partnership with the US. Modi and his government focused on industrializing India and creating jobs with the “Make in India” campaign, as well as boosting its military power. The new government intended to stand up to a growing strategic challenge from China and its partners and sought increased US assistance. In spite of Modi’s controversial past, the Prime Minister and President Obama were able to put past differences behind them and strike up a personal relationship. Modi invited the Obama to its January 2015 Republic Day festivities, which was a first for a US president. In 2014, India and the US established a contact group, which helped break a logjam in a range of programs. India and the US also created more than fifty bilateral mechanisms, particularly the India-US Commercial and Strategic Dialogue, to deal with issues in relations. In 2015, the Modi government established an insurance arrangement that overcame liability issues in civilian nuclear energy cooperation with the US that had been languishing since 2008, and in 2016 began preparatory work to pave the way for the sale of six Westinghouse nuclear power

plants.\textsuperscript{47} In spite of the progress, significant barriers remained for the partnership, especially differences over Iran and India’s stance of strategic autonomy.\textsuperscript{48}

In June 2015 the US and India signed a renewal of the Defense Framework Agreement for ten years, which represented an upgrade in defense relations. The framework agreement recognized the significance of DTII and mentioned co-development and co-production of defense articles and services. Specifically, the agreement mentioned joint development of mobile electric hybrid power sources and next generation protective ensembles for soldiers operating in biohazard environments.\textsuperscript{49} The agreement also opened the way for cooperation in jet engine technology, aircraft carriers, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. In 2016, the Obama administration further upgraded India to the status of a Major Defense Partner, which opened the way for additional co-development and co-production as well as the transfer of sensitive defense technology. In addition, the US and India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which was first proposed in 2004. Prime Minister Modi was able to overcome the lack of trust in relations with the US military that had prevented his predecessors from signing the agreement. The LEMOA held out the possibility of the India Navy using US bases in Diego Garcia and elsewhere on a case-by-case basis and the US using Indian bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR).\textsuperscript{50} In 2017, the two countries began to operationalize the LEMOA when a US Navy tanker refueled an Indian Navy ship in the Pacific Ocean. The US and India have also been cooperating on strengthening cyber-security; but they still need to sign the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (CISMOA or COMECA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA).

The US presence in Afghanistan starting in 2001 served India’s interests by keeping the country from falling into the hands of the pro-Pakistan Taliban. In 2011, US Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, and President Obama believed that Al Qaeda had received a death blow and that the time was right to begin the process of handing over responsibility of Afghanistan’s security to the government of President Hamid Karzai by the end of 2014. The concern in India was how much US presence would remain after 2014 and how long the Afghan regime would stay in power. However, the rise of Islamic State and its smashing victories in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and appearance in Afghanistan caused the administration to stop short of total withdrawal and decide to keep a residual force of ten thousand troops and air force assets in Afghanistan to prevent collapse. This caused a sense of relief in India, which had provided substantial amount of aid and road-building projects to Afghanistan. In June 2016, Prime Minister Modi signed an agreement with Iran for a $500 million to upgrade the port of Chabahar, which would enable India to establish a land corridor with Afghanistan and take over some of the burden that the US and its allies had carried in trying to stabilize and develop the country.

President Donald Trump came to power in January 2017 with the slogan, “America First”, which stoked fears in India about a possible downgrading of relations and trade war. However, the new president was interested in making economic deals with India and sustaining the defense relationship, and Prime Minister Modi responded by quickly engaging with


\textsuperscript{50} Pant and Joshi, op.cit. pp. 133-146.
In June 2017, China provoked a military standoff in the Himalayas that brought India and the US closer together. PLA troops moved onto the Doklam Plateau in the Himalayas to build a road that infringed upon the territory of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which had long been under Indian protection. The Indian Army responded by sending troops into the area to block road construction, which led to a 73-day standoff between the Indian Army and PLA. While India demonstrated resolve during the standoff in spite of China’s protests, some officials in New Delhi were careful to keep the confrontation from escalating into a border war and were concerned about US rhetoric that was casting the issue in the broader context of China’s territorial violations in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Other officials perceived that the US had not been specific enough in its support for India and Bhutan. However, some US and Indian officials asserted that Doklam was a “game changer” and would bring India ever closer to cooperating with the US and its allies.

In August 2017, President Trump announced a new US strategy towards South Asia in which the US would increase the number of troops in Afghanistan to more than ten thousand and keep its presence open-ended. The strategy included pressuring Pakistan to do more to stop terrorists from using safe havens within its borders and India providing more economic and development support to Afghanistan. The US Department of Defense under Secretary James Mattis was interested in sustaining and improving defense relations to counter a rising China in the Indian Ocean and Asia. He said that the “world’s two greatest democracies should have the two greatest militaries”. This statement was repeated by Trump and Modi in November 2017 on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila, when the two leaders pledged to elevate India’s status as a major US defense partner. As part of the December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the US pledged to “deepen the strategic partnership with India and support its leadership in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region”. At the same time, the US criticized Pakistan for its military’s unwillingness inability to counter the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network operating from on its soil. In March 2018, the Trump administration announced a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (FOIPS) and a “strong coalition of democracies” that replaced President Obama’s “Rebalance to Asia” strategy. However, in May 2018, Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that curbed Iran’s nuclear program. The US renewal of sanctions threaten India’s energy supply and is leading to new tensions in relations.

In addition, India’s agreement to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense missile

54 Interviews by the author with US and Indian officials, Washington, DC, November 2017 and New Delhi, India, December 2017.
system has placed an obstacle in the way of purchasing US combat aircraft and could eventually lead to sanctions by Washington against New Delhi.

3. The Grand Strategies of India and the US: Congruence and Divergence

While India and the US have been drawing closer together over the last two decades, with grand strategies that reflect a common concern over a rising China, the two countries will continue to have points of divergence. India’s grand strategy is aimed at continuing to grow its economy at a rate that provides more resources, strengthens national power, and raises hundreds of millions out of poverty. This means providing just enough resources for national defense and deterrence, especially against Pakistan and China, while keeping the country out of unnecessary wars. India’s interests include stabilizing South Asia, including Afghanistan, increasing its influence in the region, while countering that of China and Pakistan and guaranteeing the flow of energy supplies from and security of millions of Indian nationals living in the Persian/Arab Gulf. As India continues to grow in power, it will need a greater supply of markets in and resources from Eurasia, Africa and elsewhere, which will require greater defense spending for contingencies, such as helping to lift a potential blockade of the Gulf. India must also contend with a rising China that seeks to change the status quo in Asia and create a new order that disadvantages and encircles India.

US grand strategy is aimed at continuing to grow its national power and secure its interests, particularly throughout a US-dominated status quo, including leadership of the global economy and the dollar as the global currency. Also, US leadership will continue to aim to secure its interests in Eurasia, including countering a rising China and an aggressive Russia, as well as Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs). The main regions of concern with flashpoints for the US are Northeast Asia, Eastern Europe and the Persian/Arab Gulf. In regard to the Indian Ocean, the US is mainly concerned with maintaining freedom of navigation through the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab al Mandab and approaches to those straits. In contrast to India, the US has minimal interests in the Himalayas and is mainly concerned with chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, which means that the US would not be prepared to fight alongside India in the mountains and seas surrounding South Asia. The US has been helping India to prepare to engage China in those areas with joint exercises, but India must continue to take the lead in those areas.

In executing its grand strategy, the US will continue to maintain by far the largest military in the world. The US Department of Defense divides the world into geographical combatant commands. US Pacific Command (USPACOM) includes India in its “area of responsibility”, but the focus of the command is on China, North Korea and East Asia. US Central Command (USCENTCOM) includes Pakistan and Afghanistan in its AOR and its focus is on Iran and the Gulf and fighting VEOs. USPACOM works to draw India eastward into the South China Sea and Southeast Asia in a quadrilateral relationship with Japan, Australia and the US. While India has growing interests in Southeast Asia and an “Act East” policy and serves as a cornerstone for US strategy in the “Indo-Asia-Pacific”, the country’s main challenges lie to the north (China) and west (Pakistan and the Gulf) and its interests fit just as much into US strategy towards the Persian/Arab Gulf as towards the East China Sea and South China Sea. Therefore, it would make strategic sense for USCENTCOM to engage more with India and for India’s military to be welcomed by its US counterpart in developing contingency plans and

joint exercises that will help secure the Gulf. The Indian Navy is becoming increasingly expeditionary and would welcome inclusion in contingency plans for the Gulf. USCENTCOM – through the US force commander in Afghanistan - has been consulting regularly with counterparts in New Delhi about keeping Afghanistan from falling into the hands of the Taliban. However, USCENTCOM still values maintaining adequate relations with Pakistan to ensure the continuing flow of supplies from Karachi to Afghanistan.

In regard to the grand strategies of India and the US and the rise of China, both countries have been positioning themselves to defend the Asian status quo and fend off the growing challenge from Beijing and its territorial expansion. Both countries see rising nationalist opinion and the assertiveness of President Xi Jin Ping as obstacles to resolution of growing differences with China. In 2013, Xi came to power in China and initiated the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative, with infrastructure plans, projects, and funding that work to counter Indian and US cooperative activities with Asian countries. The US and India have not welcomed OBOR, partly because they see China’s initiatives as aimed against their influence. In New Delhi, China’s OBOR outreach to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Myanmar is seen by many as part of encirclement. China has been selling submarines to Pakistan and Bangladesh, which is also viewed as part of encirclement. By building infrastructure through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea and Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal as part of OBOR, China is lessening the possible impact of a US “distant blockade” of energy flows to through the Strait of Malacca.

Both India and the US are increasingly concerned about the growing presence of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea and East China Sea and are developing responses. Both Indian and the US analysts regard PLAN efforts to improve sustainment, tactical air cover, and basing in these waters as critical indicators of Beijing’s intentions. India and the US are strengthening their strategic partnerships with Japan in balancing against China, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Japanese government has been pushing hard for a stronger partnership with India and the US. While the US and Japan can work together in guaranteeing freedom of navigation and territorial integrity in the East China Sea and South China Sea, India can help to secure Japan’s energy supplies that pass through the Indian Ocean.

India would like the US to avoid any dialogue with China that moves towards bilateral cooperation in “solving Asian security problems”. In particular, New Delhi rejects any outside meddling in the Kashmir dispute and asserts that it is well on the way to resolving the issue in spite of interference from Pakistan. In regard to Tibet, both India and the US have quietly supported the rights of the people to some form of autonomy and self-determination since China’s forceful takeover in 1959. Tibet remains restive, and unrest by supporters of self-determination based in India could contributed to rising tensions in the Himalayas. China’s installation of a new Dalai Lama in Tibet would also increase tensions with India and the US but would not spark a military conflict. The perception in New Delhi and Washington is that Beijing remains hypersensitive about Tibet.

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India fears long-term erosion of their country’s strategic position as a result of China’s buildup of border deployments, conventional capabilities, and strategic forces. India’s greatest concern is over China’s military-logistical buildup along the Sino-Indian border. Much more likely is a conflict in the Himalayas, especially with ongoing border issues. Also, China has projects under way to dam the Brahmaputra River and other streams that could deprive parts of India of vital water sources. The 2017 Doklam confrontation raised the prospect of a new phase in Sino-Indian confrontation. However, since then, the two sides have remained cautious and not escalated beyond skirmishes.

In Southeast Asia and the South China Sea, India and the US have a shared interest in cooperating to maintain security and the status quo, since more than half of India’s trade passes through those waters as does much of the trade of the US and its allies and partners. New Delhi and Washington has been involved in ASEAN plus defense ministers meetings, as well as Indian Navy and US Navy port calls and exercises with ASEAN countries. The US and India both have partnerships with Vietnam, and the three countries will most likely be cooperating with joint exercises and other activities in the future.

Starting in the 1990s, India implemented a “Look East” policy, which achieved success especially in engagement with Myanmar, opening the country to a wide range of countries, including the US. The policy has also enabled India to compete for influence with China, which has been winning over Cambodia and Laos and is looking to draw other Southeast Asian countries to its side. The successor to Look East, Prime Minister Modi’s “Act East” policy, has focused on expanding activities into Southeast Asia via infrastructure development, foreign direct investment and a free trade area with ASEAN, which complement US policies in the region. In January 2018, Prime Minister Modi invited all ten ASEAN heads of state to India’s Republic Day festivities in a display of Indian soft power and to celebrate twenty-five years of the ASEAN-India Dialogue. There has been an increase in trade between India and ASEAN member states from $1 billion in 2000 to $15 billion in 2016. India has been helping to build an “east-west Indo-ASEAN/Ganges-Mekong overland corridor,” which will connect India with Vietnam and provide greater Indian involvement and influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

India has agreed to collaborate with Indonesia on joint defense production, technology transfers, and technical assistance as well as the sourcing of defense equipment. The Indian and Singapore navies are implementing mutual coordination and logistics-sharing and berthing rights for surface vessels and submarines and landing rights for naval aircraft. India is also engaged in a range of defense-related activities with Malaysia, as well as with the Philippines.

Though India does have increasing trade with Southeast Asian countries and has adopted the act east policy, India’s strategic reach does not extend much beyond the South

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69 “India, Singapore agree to improve business access”, The Times of India, 1 June 2018.
China Sea. For one, China trades even more with ASEAN states than do India and the US. For India to establish a permanent presence in the South China Sea, perhaps with berthing rights in Vietnam, would constitute an overreach beyond its current capabilities and a provocation to China. However, if tensions escalate towards conflict, India could serve US strategic interests by distracting Chinese ground and air forces towards the Himalayas and Indian Ocean and away from the South China Sea and East China Sea. The Indian Navy can also inhibit the flow of oil and minerals to China through the Indian Ocean in case of a confrontation in East Asia as part of a possible “distant blockade”. Also, the US and Japan could serve India’s strategic interests by distracting China away from a confrontation in the Himalayas.

In West Asia, both India and the US are concerned with Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the Persian/Arab Gulf. Afghanistan remains a major source of concern in New Delhi. There is the danger that – as in the 1990s – the dominoes will fall, with Afghanistan succumbing to the Taliban, large parts of Pakistan falling to the Taliban, and a rise in violent extremist activity in Kashmir and Pakistan-backed violent extremists within the rest of India. In attempting to secure Afghanistan, the Trump administration’s proposal of inserting thousands of Indian forces there would cause a major crisis with Pakistan. India has to be careful to place no more than a couple hundred Indian military advisors in Afghanistan for fear of escalation. However, the Trump administration’s open-ended Afghanistan strategy has brought strategic convergence with India but no “light at the end of the tunnel”.

Both India and the US are concerned about China’s growing alliance with Pakistan and overland route from Xinjiang and access to the Indian Ocean through the port that it is developing at Gwardar in Baluchistan as part of its OBOR strategic program. The Trump administration’s moves away from Pakistan and continued warm relations with India have been welcomed in New Delhi. However, the US will continue to maintain relations with Pakistan in order to continue to have access to Afghanistan and press Islamabad to continue to fight the Taliban, Haqqani Network and remnants of Al Qaeda. Therefore, the best that the US and India can do is to manage relations with Pakistan and prevent radical Islamists from taking control of the country and its nuclear weapons.

India and the US diverge on how to deal with Iran. India favors engagement, while the Trump administration favors scrapping of the nuclear agreement and renewal of sanctions and containment. While Washington is reassuming towards a hostile stance towards Tehran, New Delhi has established good relations with the Rouhani government. India needs to maintain relations with Iran in order to maintain access to Central Asia and Afghanistan and meet growing energy needs. Iran’s nuclear ambitions and sometimes provocative actions in the Gulf will continue to keep the US and the Fifth Fleet occupied and may eventually provoke escalation.

The US is more concerned than India about Russia’s more aggressive posture, and New Delhi has not joined the West in sanctioning Moscow for the seizure of Crimea and denouncing its hybrid warfare against Ukraine and Western democracies. India is still interested in buying Russian military hardware and joint weapons production, but the US has supplanted Russia

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72 Markey, Daniel S. (2013): No Exit from Pakistan: America’s Troubled Relationship with Islamabad, Cambridge University Press. China is Pakistan’s leading arms supplier, and the two armies conduct war games and drills together. China, seemingly unconcerned about Pakistan’s rapidly expanding nuclear weapons program, is building nuclear reactors to help meet Pakistan’s desperate energy needs.

as India’s closest partner and major arms suppliers. India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in November 2017 as a way of preventing encirclement by China, and Moscow paved the way for New Delhi’s admission as a way of balancing against China in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{74} Change in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states has led them to welcome the reentry of Afghanistan, the US and India into the region as a way of balancing against Russia and China as well as Iran and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{75}

3.1. Multilateral Defense Cooperation, US-India Relations and India’s Grand Strategy

India is moving towards greater defense cooperation with the US, Australia and Japan.\textsuperscript{76} India’s goals include maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea and Persian/Arab Gulf in the face of China’s expansionism and perceived encirclement. In pursuing those goals, India thus far has been more willing to commit to trilateral exercises and other “minilateral” forms of cooperation as opposed to more expansive quadrilateral cooperation. In 2007, quadrilateral joint exercises involving India, the US, Japan, and Australia caused China to protest, which led New Delhi to revise its plans. Since 2014, India has revived multilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, including off the west coast of Australia. However, in May 2017, India dropped Australia from naval exercises with the US and Japan after protests from Beijing. Also, in 2017, India, Japan, and the US held joint naval exercises in the SCS, though the three countries did not engage in freedom of navigation exercises close to China’s militarized outposts in the SCS.

Signs of emerging quadrilateral defense cooperation include regular meetings of the four defense ministers and the development of India-Japan, India-US, and India-Australia defense relations and joint exercises. The four countries are also engaged in Track 1.5 and Track II dialogues, and there is a Japan-Australia-India dialogue. India-US defense relations have grown, including the LEMOA and a proposal for brand new F-16 Block 70s to be manufactured in India. The latter would give a boost to the Modi government’s “Make in India” campaign and develop US Air Force-Indian Air Force relations and interoperability. Also, the US has agreed to let India use its base in Diego Garcia for logistics, while India has promised to make the Nicobar Islands available to the US. In sum, the vision of a multilateral defense network involving India that enforces freedom of navigation remains a work in progress. India is willing to partner to some extent with the US in patrolling the Indian Ocean and ensuring freedom of navigation. However, India will be careful not to be drawn into an alliance with the US and will work to maintain its “strategic autonomy”. At issue is what more the US can do to assist India beyond helping to modernize India’s air force and army. A strengthening of the strategic partnership with the US is as far as India is prepared to go; an alliance with the US would put India in a difficult position in relations with China.

3.2. The US Navy-Indian Navy Relationship

While the US has held many joint exercises with the Indian Army and Indian Air Force, the focus of those services remains on China and Pakistan to the north and west. In contrast, the Indian Navy and US Navy share joint objectives in the Indian Ocean region and beyond and will continue to be the closest services. The Indian Navy is able to help provide security with anti-piracy and anti-submarine patrols, especially in the sea lanes running from the Gulf of Aden to the Persian/Arab Gulf and through the Strait of Malacca. The US and Indian navies have formed what an “exercise


\textsuperscript{75} Durson, James: “Central Asia Opens the Door to Afghanistan”, \textit{The Diplomat}, 10 May 2018.

partnership” developed through frequent joint interactions over more than two decades. The joint exercises started in the 1990s with basic passing maneuvers among naval vessels, anti-submarine warfare exercises and replenishment-at-sea drills. By the 2010s, they had graduated to aircraft carrier strike group operations; maritime patrol and reconnaissance operations; and visit, board, search and seizure operations, as well as search and rescue, anti-piracy, underway replenishment, and communications exercises. In the annual Malabar exercise, the Japanese Navy has also been involved. The US would like to see more interoperability between the US and Indian navies. Further progress could be made in developing interoperability in disaster relief operations and then using this as a stepping stone towards greater interoperability.

The Indian Navy has developed a maritime security strategy and naval strategic doctrine, which will help in developing the partnership.\(^7\) The strategy entails the expansion of Indian agreements for operating locations in the Indian Ocean. Besides Diego Garcia, India will be looking for naval and air facilities from which it can operate. In spite of the growing importance of the Navy, there continue to be debates about how capable and modern the Navy is in regard to doctrine, warships and weaponry. There are also concerns about where and if the Navy fits in India’s national security strategy and about its share of the defense budget, as well about the creation of a national maritime advisor, a cabinet committee on maritime affairs and a maritime commission. The Indian Navy is less capable than the PLAN, though the latter is engaged mainly in the East and South China seas and not so much in the Indian Ocean. However, China is increasingly involved in the Indian Ocean region through the “string of pearls”. The partnership between the US and Indian navies will be affected as a result of China’s activities in the Pakistani port of Gwardar and growing partnership with Pakistan’s navy.

The future path of the Indian Navy will determine how much security India will be able to provide in the Indian Ocean region. In regard to modernization, the aircraft carrier Vikrant and the nuclear submarine Arihant should be operational by 2020. The Indian Navy could allow the US Navy to focus its attentions on the East China Sea and South China Sea and Persian/Arab Gulf in the 2020s. Also, India may find that it is eventually confronted by China’s anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) strategy in the Indian Ocean and may have to develop its own “air-sea battle” operational concept that will require modernization and assistance from the US.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of India-US relations and India’s grand strategy over the past two decades is a result of changing power balances and an affirmation of structural realism. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of unipolarity opened the way for the US superpower to engage with India and for New Delhi to move away from Moscow and towards a partnership with Washington while maintaining an autonomous grand strategy of a rising power. In the past two decades, China’s rise as a major power in Asia has introduced propelled the partnership. Domestic politics also has played a role in the growing partnership, with the growth of capitalism and nationalism and the rise of the BJP as a dominant political force. These factors have driven interest in the US partnership to counter China and its growing partnerships in South Asia and the specter of encirclement.

A tripolar balance of power is a growing possibility, as existed in Asia in the 1970s and 1980s when China “tilted” towards the US without forming an alliance in order to counter the Soviet Union. It is likely that India will try to play the US and China off against each other, largely tilting towards the former and against the latter, while maintaining both strategic

\(^7\) “Indian Maritime Doctrine”, globalsecurity.org., at https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/india/in-navy-doctrine.htm
autonomy from the US as well as partnership. In spite of the progress that has been made in relations, India will not move from being a partner of the US towards an alliance. Seven decades of non-alignment and a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Soviet Russia from 1971-91 established patterns in India’s foreign policy that have been slow to change. India has a long-established relationship with Iran, which tends to complicate New Delhi’s partnership with Washington. In addition, the US tendency to occasionally try to repair relations with Pakistan has fostered Indian suspicions.

The US-India exercise partnership has a chance of moving towards greater military interoperability and a more substantial strategic partnership. India has proved that it is willing and able to be a partner with the US, primarily by maintaining security and stability in the Indian Ocean region and through the development of its naval forces. As the US desired, India is anchoring economic growth and stabilization in South. US activity focused in Southeast Asia will be complemented by India’s Act East policy. There is the prospect of joint Indo-US partnerships with Myanmar, Vietnam and other ASEAN nations. However, Southwest Asia and its crises will continue to distract the US and India from “looking east” as much as they should.

The US will find it difficult to reassure India and other partners that it will follow through on its security commitments. US credibility will remain suspect, while it continues to engage China and Pakistan. While the US is paying more attention to Asia and less to the rest of the world, the major flashpoints in Asia will remain in the East and South China seas and less so in the Indian Ocean. India will continue to press for transfer of technology and local production of weapons and other defense items, and US slow rolling will continue to cause frustration in New Delhi. US officials doubt Indian credibility and see India as a geopolitical underperformer, which may not be able to deliver as much in the way of a strategic partnership as Washington would like. India’s relations with Iran and agreement to purchase the S-400 present additional challenges to stronger collaboration.

The US-India strategic partnership is now advancing as many officials and security experts in the US and India have wanted to see. This is because the Nehruvian strand is fading in importance in Indian foreign policy thinking. The BJP government has brought a resurgence of nationalism and has led India to draw closer to the US. With a BJP government, the US-India strategic partnership has developed more in line with the Washington’s vision of New Delhi’s role. In the future, it is unlikely that the Congress Party will return to the type of dominance that it enjoyed from 1947 to the 1990s. At the same time, the BJP will probably not have the type of majority that it had from 2014-2019.

In relation to the US, India wants to maintain its strategic autonomy and does not feel compelled to move from a partnership towards an alliance. Only sustained aggression by China would compel India to enter into an alliance with the US and move from the current state of “soft balancing” towards China towards “hard balancing” by forming alliances. As India engages in soft balancing by strengthening relations with states that are concerned with the rise and expansion of China, India is seeking stronger partnerships. India may eventually ask the US for a surge of military hardware and security assistance in dealing with China over the escalating border dispute. However, moves toward a US-India alliance are unlikely unless China pushes India too far. Much depends on how China behaves on the border and conducts relations with Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Washington has proceeded cautiously in building its partnership with New Delhi in order to avoid unnecessarily provoking Beijing. However, in the unlikely event that China was to attack India, the door would be open to the formation of an alliance with a mutual defense pact with the US.
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