

US-India Ties: the Limits to Defense Cooperation with New Delhi by *Sourabh Gupta*

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Much has been written over the past decade about the promise of a transformed US-India strategic relationship, both globally and in Asia. From safeguarding the global commons to promoting the spread of democratic values to preventing the domination of Asia by a single power, this partnership of ‘natural allies’ is deemed to be ‘indispensible’ for stability and prosperity in the 21st century. Much less has been noted about the limits to such cooperation. Yet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton having passed through New Delhi last week following the second round of the annual US-India Strategic Dialogue, one of only a half-dozen such dialogs that the US has, these limits appear to be kicking in forcefully.

In late April, despite personal lobbying by President Obama, New Delhi eliminated the top two US contenders from its shortlist of suppliers for the India Air Force’s fourth-generation of advanced combat aircraft. With New Delhi’s preliminary design contract toward co-development of a fifth-generation fighter recently signed with Moscow, the window to US-India collaboration in this space appears to have closed.

In April, New Delhi signaled its disinclination to upgrade the strategic dialog to a joint 2+2 (foreign + defense ministers) format, as the US has with Tokyo – in turn leading to postponement of the Strategic Dialogue. Attempts in May to revive the issue were met with firm objections, leaving this format of joint talks stillborn. Near-term disappointments aside, it is the underlying variance in New Delhi’s strategic purposes that has been the key obstacle to deepening the US-India defense relationship.

Ditching Defense Interoperability

At the time of its visualization in the early-to-mid 2000s, bilateral defense cooperation, with a robust maritime component, was viewed as the crown jewel of the burgeoning US-India strategic partnership. The US hope – if not expectation – was two-fold:

First, New Delhi would be Washington’s key security partner in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), increasingly joined with US military in use-of-force planning to address regional contingencies – a Japan, without Article 9 restraints, of the IOR. The 2005 bilateral Framework Defense Agreement lent credence to this belief, envisaging Indian collaboration in “multinational operations ... of common interest” that conceptually span the range from humanitarian and disaster relief (HA/DR) activities to Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)-style interdiction to perhaps even ‘coalition of the willing’ interventions that lack an explicit UN mandate.

Second, as such collaboration was extended to ‘out-of-area’ operations, ranging from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, New Delhi would participate in the soft maritime *constraintment* of China. India’s dispatch of a temporary liaison officer to US Pacific Command headquarters in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, its willingness to participate in trilateral naval exercises in the East China Sea, as well as its hosting of wide-ranging multinational exercises in critical Indian Ocean waterways that serve as approaches to the Malacca Straits, lent weight to this belief.

On both counts, expectations weren’t borne out. A civil nuclear deal and endorsement of India’s Security Council aspirations notwithstanding, New Delhi appears unwilling to confront Beijing in any security format other than one which is strictly bilateral (Sino-Indian), nor countenance the degree of ‘jointness’ or interoperability in bilateral defense planning preferred by Washington. Indeed at the very point defense interoperability assumes the trappings of quasi-informal military alignment, New Delhi tends to reflexively shrink from such engagement.

- Almost a decade after its first broaching by Washington, New Delhi is yet to post a mid-level officer on a permanent basis to Pacific Command. Recent statements by India’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) that it does not seek such a relationship with US combatant commands, as well as MoD’s disallowing of all unsupervised contact between armed forces officials and foreign defense delegations, suggests a shrinking space for exchange of ideas at the mil-mil level with PACOM.
- Despite being afforded an exceptional window to the operation of the US military’s CENTRIX battlegroup networking system during *Malabar* series exercises, New Delhi remains averse to signing a Memorandum of Agreement (a CISMoa) that would facilitate tactical communications system interoperability. Driven as much by intrusiveness concerns, New Delhi has chosen to vest dependence instead on Russia’s military-grade satellite navigational system which is as yet only semi-operational. That top-dollar purchases of US-origin military transport and reconnaissance aircraft have had to be consequently kitted with down-rated avionics suites, has not changed New Delhi’s thinking.
- Leery that navy-to-navy fuel transfer arrangements, as practiced during the US-India *Malabar* series exercises might set a precedent for reciprocal fuel-sharing requests during peacetime or otherwise in the South China Sea and beyond, New Delhi has stepped back from initialing a mutual Logistics Support Agreement (LSA). Provision for logistics cooperation, it bears noting, was the rare case of an interoperability-aiding deliverable that was explicitly secured by Washington

when drawing up in 2006 the Indo-US Framework for Maritime Security Cooperation. A variant of such logistics cross-sharing, particularly insofar as it relates to non-military and non-traditional security competencies in the IOR such as search and rescue, anti-piracy, etc., remains an objective worth pursuing ... perhaps when the current, none-too-US-friendly Indian defense minister demits office.

- Apprehensive that involvement of US carrier battle groups in the *Malabar* exercises and attendant shore leave for hundreds of US servicemen on Indian soil might create demands for SOFA-equivalent immunity protections, the exercises have been scaled down. And following a bluntly-worded demarche by Beijing in 2007 in the wake of five-party war games hosted in the Bay of Bengal, the multinational component of these exercises has been shifted 'out-of-area' altogether – all ensuing *Malabar* exercises in the IOR have since been strictly US-India affairs.

Far from suggesting a willingness to extend Indian maritime security obligations beyond the IOR, as some have inferred the trilateral *Malabar* exercises in the East China Sea to be, it in fact reveals an Indian *disinclination* to be appended to a US and allied maritime strategy in its Indian Ocean zone of core interest. Practical arms-length collaboration with, as opposed to integrating within – as has also been the pattern, in practice, with New Delhi's support for US-led, international anti-piracy operations in these waters – appears to be the ceiling to such bilateral defense cooperation.

Pursuing Geo-Political Convergence in Asia Instead

Although it would be easy to blame New Delhi's reluctance to pursue bilateral defense interoperability solely on rote attachment to an unyielding strategic autonomy, a deeper strategic calculus is in the works. As outlined in 2007 by India's then-foreign minister at the peak of the US-Indian honeymoon, increased cooperation with each of the great global power centers had – for the first time in India's independent history – begotten an upward spiral of improving relations with each of the other powers. The essence of India's diplomatic strategy was to ensure that no set of great power bilateral relationships was advanced to the detriment of another.

Conversely, to the extent that US-India defense ties, and accompanying procurement relationship, was perceived in Beijing and Moscow as a precursor to an informal military and political alignment, disenchantment in these capitals had the potential to reverse this virtuous cycle of relationships and unhinge a key pivot of New Delhi's multi-vectored diplomatic strategy. Paradoxical as it might appear, Beijing (the presumptive target of such ties) and Moscow (the prospective loser from such a procurement relationship) limit the scope of India's defense cooperation with the US.

To the extent, further, that such ties are viewed in New Delhi as being somewhat superfluous to security requirements in its immediate maritime neighborhood, US-Indian defense cooperation that assumes the characteristics of quasi-informal military alignment will remain aspirational at best well into the future. Beijing's dispatch of naval assets to protect its

drilling and pipeline interests off the Burmese shoreline, as also the presence of PLAN submarines in the more enabling nautical environment of the Bay of Bengal, might alter this calculation, although those are both hypothetical at this time.

That said, a stable geo-political balance in Asia remains the necessary condition of the Indian national interest. To this end, appetite exists in New Delhi for sharing perceptions and assessments geared toward upholding such an equilibrium – bilaterally with the US, trilaterally with Japan, as well as within the open architecture of Asian security multilateralism. The recently announced US-India-Japan senior officials-level dialog mechanism, as well as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) framework, provide useful venues in this regard – both to employ diplomatic pushback to check Chinese overreach (as was the case in Hanoi at the 2010 ARF summit) as well as to instill a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities, and the limits, to trilateral and regional defense and strategic cooperation in Asia.

Broadening the conversation to cover trilateral and regional trade, financial and economic integration is also paramount, given that US-India convergence on the larger questions of the future of Asia's geo-politics is unlikely in an environment lacking such co-dependencies.

In this regard, the Obama administration's recent decision, reportedly, to invite India's participation as an observer at the November 2011 APEC summit in Hawaii, bears commending. An equivalent effort needs to be brought to bear on New Delhi to strike down barriers within its trade, manufacturing, land use, labor, and industrial bankruptcy regime, so that a trilateral trade format involving Japanese design inputs, Indian production-shared light manufacturing and US final goods consumption demand might reinforce a Washington-Tokyo-New Delhi geo-economic co-dependency that is currently lacking. Actualizing the vast commercial potential of US-India (and Japan) civil nuclear cooperation, currently stalled at the political hurdle of liability laws, enrichment and re-processing technologies, and the not-insignificant obstacle of a meandering New Delhi-Tokyo civil nuclear cooperation negotiation, would not hurt either.

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