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India Needs to Upgrade its Strategic Partnership with the United States



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Significant developments affecting India's strategic binary with the United States and China appear to be staring India starkly in the face, seeking a review of the nuances of this triangular relationship. Though Prime Minister Modi started his tenure two years ago by investing substantial political capital towards strengthening both these relationships, while displaying an even handed approach, the developments over the last year dictate that India takes a more calibrated position while defining its own relationship with either country. Both the US and China have competitively vied for India's attention in the past but India has been careful not to favour one relationship at the cost of the other.

But given some recent negativity in the India-China relationship, especially that involving anti-India posturing by China, at the behest of Pakistan, on a number of important security related issues, including some unwarranted comments on the situation in Kashmir, it is a moot point whether India should continue to be even handed to the point of not taking a more decisive stand in keeping with its security interests.

Key Points

1. With a view to achieve its regional and global aspirations, it is in India's national interests to make a strategic choice between US and China, the pre-dominant players in the evolving global power equations.
2. For India, China is an important neighbour, but China does not appear keen to resolve the mutual border disputes.
3. China has also been making deliberate efforts to undermine India's influence in the region and the world.
4. Indo-US relations have been on an upswing since the signing of the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008. The US is supporting the rise of India in the region and the world.
5. Given the growing negativity in the India-China security dynamics, it would be in India's interests to give up its even handed approach, and instead, take a 'calibrated' strategic tilt towards the US.

India Needs to Upgrade ...

Thus, the balance in the mutual strategic binary appears to be tilting in favour of the US, as was evident in the dynamics of PM Modi's visit to the US in June 2016 and the chemistry between the two leaders. Having said that, there is also a need for India to study the viability of such a tilt towards the US and its impact on India's long term security interests.

It would be pointed out by many that India-US relations have not been without their occasional ripples, despite a large measure of positivity on both sides. To that extent, every once in a while, skeptics in India raise questions about the long term sustainability of the evolving India-US strategic and defense partnership. This, despite the fresh lease of life it received in 2008 after signing of the Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement that year and also the recent signing of pacts on defense cooperation and sharing of counter terrorism intelligence between President Obama and PM Modi during the latter's visit to the United States in June this year.

The skepticism is largely because of the tumultuous history of the India-US relationship ever since India's independence in 1947 and the distinctively different approaches of the two countries towards each other's relationships with other countries, in general, and their shared relationship, in particular. Whereas the US is generally seen to perceive its relationships in 'black' and 'white' terms ("you are with us or against us"), India is fiercely protective of its neutrality and has always wanted the US to take a more accommodative approach towards India's bilateral relationships with other countries.

India's efforts at neutrality after independence in 1947 and its declining the US offer to join the anti-communist alliances (CENTO and SEATO) were perceived negatively in Washington. This even resulted in the US arming India's arch-rival Pakistan, which had opportunistically joined these alliances, with weaponry which could be (and was) used against India. Predictably, India was pushed subsequently towards the Soviet Union to seek arms to defend itself, after China, in 1962, and Pakistan, in 1965, launched wars against India to forcibly

settle disputed borders, the latter using US supplied Patton tanks and Sabre jets in its wars against India.

India's justifiable claim to emerging power status is based on its democratic credentials, other existing and potential strengths in the realms of economy, technology, and military, as also its advantages in geography and demography. Further, its strategic attraction to other major powers has also emanated from its unofficial label as the global 'swing state' that can tilt the future balance of power either way between the Western powers (US-Europe) and their strategic rivals, currently the emerging China-Russia bloc.

Within this strategic backdrop, the common democratic values and a shared history of friendship and cooperation between the US and India has facilitated growth of a strong partnership between both countries at the people-to-people and Governmental levels. Also, more recently, the growing influence of the vibrant Indian-American diaspora has had a constructive effect in strengthening the relationship. Based on the sense that both countries are 'natural allies', there are some in the US who opine that a powerful India would always be to US advantage, even if there was no formal strategic relationship between the two countries.

Similarly, India's traditional good relations with countries of Western Europe, on the one hand, and Russia on the other, are also likely to remain strong, though there are some hiccups with regard to the latter on account of India making efforts at widening the external sources of its defense purchases.

Nonetheless, currently, India's strategic options seem to be in a flux, primarily due to the dynamics - mutual, external and internal - of its seemingly competing relationships with the US and China, which are playing the dominant roles of the evolving power blocs.

In that context, whereas India would like to engage China and resolve its mutual territorial disputes at the earliest, China does not appear to be interested

in making progress on the issue any time soon. Further, the negativities associated with these disputes, especially the catastrophic 1962 war, the periodic Chinese cross-border transgressions and the recent Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) military upgrades focused on the border with India, convey an unambiguous message that India would be naïve not to prepare for China turning more assertive and confrontationist towards India at some stage in the not-too-distant future. Also, the distinct anti-India nature of the enduring 'all weather' China-Pakistan partnership (alliance?) has also generated some fresh antagonism towards India, which is only likely to get aggravated in the future.

It has also become clear that there is going to be no let up in China's efforts at limiting India's big-power aspirations in the region and the world, and hyphenating its inter-se relationships with India and Pakistan, as evident from its recent posturing on the NSG membership issue, its standing in the way of UN sanctions against the Pathankot terror mastermind Masood Azhar and its unfriendly comments on the situation in Kashmir.

India's relationship with the US too has not been without its problems. Frictions with the US in the past have mostly related to the US continuing to supply frontline military equipment to Pakistan though well aware that, most of these, especially combat aircraft and anti-tank missiles, can be used only against India. Reference is also made to the lowest point in the India-US relationship, when in 1971, in the run-up to and during the India-Pakistan War, the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, at the behest of President Nixon, suggested to China to undertake military action against India. President Nixon also despatched the US Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal during the war to intimidate the Indian military, despite being aware that the latter had intervened in East Pakistan primarily to stop the Pakistan Army's genocide of its Bengali populace.

Skeptics also highlight the sporadic anti-India voices emanating from influential quarters in the US Congress, on issues like religious intolerance, which

are successful in raising doubts or diluting the India-US partnership. These negative developments, which could well be the handiwork of Pakistan hired lobbyists, do cast a shadow and are used by the skeptics to drive home their point.

An example of recent US unpredictability being quoted is that, on June 9th, just a day after the Indian Prime Minister's passionate speech to the joint session of the US Congress, the US Senate rejected an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA-17), which would have given India the status of 'a global strategic and defense partner', a much touted part of the agreement signed between the leaders on both sides just the previous day. The Indian government, however, has played down this reversal, describing it as only a temporary hiccup, which will be rectified in due course of time.

On the positive side, the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008 marked a genuine revival of the India-US strategic relationship. The signing of the Agreement has been described as the high point of the relationship, as the US, in a departure from previous practice, avoided hyphenating India and arch-adversary Pakistan, by not agreeing to a similar deal for Pakistan also. Nonetheless, India did not agree at that time to the US request to sign the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), which would have allowed both countries access to each other's military bases for logistics support purposes, possibly due to the political controversy the move generated in India at that time.

So, the writing on the wall is clear. If a strategic choice were to be made, despite China having the advantage of being a neighbour, the decision should go in favour of the US. After all, the choice is between a communist China, which is trying to restrict India's influence to the South Asian framework, and a democratic USA, one that is trying to give wings to India's regional and global aspirations. Of course, India cannot ignore China and must continue to engage with it, while accepting that China will currently mould its Indian relationship keeping the Pakistan hyphenation and interests in view.

... Partnership with the United States

On a related note, the US must be made to understand the independent nature of India's foreign policy, whereby India will continue to engage countries like China, Russia and Iran in pursuit of its own national interests. The US - India relationship will have to be a partnership of equals, mindful of each other's interests and security concerns.

Towards that end, there are reports now that both sides are willing to upgrade the defence relationship to the next level of a global strategic cum defence partnership that would match the US relationship with its alliance partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The Indian Navy's recent participation, along with the navies of the US, Japan and Australia in a naval exercise in the South China Sea are indicative of the new resolve. It is also reported that both sides are close to jointly signing an improved version of the LSA, namely the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which would provide the US military access to Indian military bases, for logistic purposes, on a reciprocal basis.

Undoubtedly, that would be an encouraging development, as it can be presumed that India's earlier security and administrative concerns on the issue would be addressed before the agreement is signed. Further, it would be incumbent hereafter for the US to not only be sensitive to India's security concerns but also be willing to provide the necessary political push to India's regional and global aspirations. These measures should include US support for India's membership of the NSG as well as for India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. The US government should also provide India access to the most modern in

US technologies, to include defence technologies through the aegis of the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) forum, which so far, had offered only obsolete technology. Also, the US will have to accept that, as is incumbent in case of any close relationship, it cannot, despite its operational compulsions in Afghanistan, provide weaponry to Pakistan, which can be used against India.

There are also some concerns related to whether implementation of agreements signed at this juncture, just a few months before the forthcoming US presidential elections, would be subject to the vagaries associated with the rival campaigns and the eventual outcome of the elections. If any important agreement like the LEMOA is signed now, whereas India would be bound by the 'letter' of the agreement in the future, on the other hand, the US may not be bound by the 'spirit' of the agreement, which would tend to be defined by fresh foreign policy priorities of the new occupant of the White House. The eventual victor in the presidential race could well turn the growing relationship on its head, if he or she perceives that Indians pose a threat to US interests at some level, including 'stealing' US jobs.

To that extent, though there is ample justification in upgrading the India-US strategic and defence partnership, it would be prudent to await the results of the US presidential elections before India commits itself to agreements like the LEMOA. Otherwise, having given away our bargaining chip even before the elections, without securing guaranteed commitments from the US government on many related reciprocal issues of strategic importance to India, we may have a lot to regret, at leisure, in the future.

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