



THE LEADERSHIP UNDERSTANDS THAT THEIR WORLDVIEWS DON'T ALWAYS MATCH. WITHIN THAT CONSTRAINT, THE PENTAGON AND SOUTH BLOCK ARE TAKING US-INDIA DEFENSE RELATIONS TO THE NEXT LEVEL, SAYS **NITIN A GOKHALE**.

# India-US defense ties: Well-intentioned, but not on the same page yet

Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of the Honolulu headquartered United States Pacific Command, is a blunt man. As a military leader who reckons China poses the greatest threat to world peace in today's context because of its reckless actions in the East and South China Seas, Admiral Harris doesn't pull punches when it comes to commenting on China's 'adventurism.'

And so it was this March in Delhi when he created ripples by his remarks that 'in the not too distant future, American and Indian Navy vessels steaming together will become a common and welcome sight throughout Indo-Asia-Pacific waters, as we work together to maintain freedom of the seas for all nations.'

It was a dare to China, but more importantly, it appeared to be the clearest signal yet from Washington that it wants India to be part of a coalition against China.

India's Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar promptly rejected the proposal, saying, 'As of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol; we only do joint exercises. The question of joint patrol does not arise.'

This public exchange encapsulates the state of India-US defense relations: Well-intentioned, but not on the same page yet.

That both New Delhi and Washington recognize the need to deepen their defense partnership is an acknowledged fact. The point of dissonance is the way to achieve it.

Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right of center government, India is not inclined to join the US camp, much to the dismay of America's strategic community. Instead, New Delhi wants to follow the principle of multi-alignment.

So, even as it seeks to get US defense technology and is willing to collaborate on some key projects like aircraft carriers, India simultaneously wants to keep its complex relationship with China on an even keel by following the 'collaboration-with-competition' approach, a policy followed by Washington with Beijing for a couple of decades now.

When Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, considered to be the most India friendly US official in recent years, came to India in early April, he knew that India would not accede to all the demands that the US makes on the defense front. He was quite content to announce — with Parrikar — that the US and India had made substantial progress on one of the three 'foundational agreements.'

The Logistics Support Agreement — rechristened the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement as an India-specific pact — is still a work in progress despite the United States pushing for it. It will eventually be signed — maybe even during Modi's coming US visit — but the time taken over finalizing its content demonstrates India's reluctance to be seen as an American 'groupie.'

The LEMOA is the easiest of the three agreements that the



INDIAN AIR FORCE

Jaguars fighters fly alongside an IAF II-78 refueller over Alaska during Red Flag Alaska 16-1. The exercises were conducted in the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex, the largest instrumented air, ground and electronic combat training range in the world at more than 65,000 square miles.

US is keen India should sign. The other two — the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Understanding and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geospatial information) — are politically sensitive issues and even the Modi government, despite its political heft, will be wary of agreeing to their provisions.

The CISMOA, for instance, may inadvertently lock the Indian military into a technology regime driven by the US. About the BECA, the Indian authorities have concerns about the collection of data by the US private sector that does its job on behalf of the US military.

The LEMOA, on the other hand, has its roots in the Access and Cross Servicing Agreement, which was signed by the US with its NATO allies and permitted alliance partners to access supplies, spare parts, servicing from each other's land, air bases and ports.

In the Cold War era, it was essential for allied forces to operate seamlessly anywhere in the world to support possi-

ble military confrontation with the Warsaw Pact nations. It provided the legal framework for operational flexibility while ensuring the constitutional autonomy of member nations.

Since platforms and equipment in the alliance countries had their origin either in the US or Europe, the positioning of spare parts for servicing of these platforms while transiting through any of these alliance nations, provided legal protection against local taxation provisions and adverse public opinion.

As Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha, former commander-in-chief of India's Western Naval Command, wrote last week: 'The bilateral relations of the US with a number of other countries have lost their strategic autonomy. They deal with China and rest of the world with equal ease. Sri Lanka has often provided logistics support to Chinese submarines and naval vessels at its ports. In fact, they have all benefited by acquiring US hardware, logistics and spares support.'

The discussion on the basic agreements apart, the US and India are currently busy operationalizing the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative. Four pathfinder projects, agreed to during President Obama's visit in January 2015, are in various stages of finalization but are yet to fructify.

Similarly, India and the US conduct several joint exercises across the three services. The Indian Air Force very recently participated in the 'Red Flag' Exercise in Alaska; the Indian and US armies regularly have Exercise Yudh Abhyas while Exercise Malabar, initially a bilateral arrangement between the Indian and US navies has now expanded to become a tri-lateral exercise with Japan.

Last month, four Indian Navy ships sailed to the Malacca Straits, an area of maritime interest to India. They will be deployed on a 75-day operational sojourn in the South China and North West Pacific.

During this overseas deployment, the ships of the Eastern Fleet will make port calls at Cam Rahn Bay (Vietnam), Subic Bay (the Philippines), Sasebo (Japan), Busan (South Korea), Vladivostok (Russia) and Port Klang (Malaysia).

In addition to showing the Flag in this region of vital strategic importance to India, these ships will also participate in MALABAR-16, a maritime exercise with the US Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Forces. This is in keeping with the new spirit of cooperation between the Pentagon and India's defense ministry.



THE STATE DEPARTMENT

# When will US accommodate India's strategic interests?

THE NEW WARMTH IN RELATIONS HAS FAILED TO EASE INDIAN CONCERNS OVER AMERICA'S POLICIES ON PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN, CHINA AND TERRORISM, SAYS **BRAHMA CHELLANEY**.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has built a personal rapport with President Barack Obama, and his fourth visit to the US in less than two years highlights warming Indo-American relations. Few doubt that US-India ties are better and closer than ever before. From being estranged democracies in the second half of the 20th century, the US and India have become closely engaged democracies.

Besides a shared love of democracy, three elements drive the US-India strategic partnership: Money, military hardware, and Asian geopolitics. Their partnership promises to be a force for stability and security in Indo-Pacific relations.

The blossoming of ties with the US has become an important diplomatic asset for India. The new warmth in relations, however, has failed to ease Indian concerns over America's regional policies, including on Pakistan, Afghanistan and terrorism, or address complaints of Indian information technology and pharmaceutical industries about US practices, especially non-tariff barriers.

For the US, displacing Russia as India's largest arms supplier has been a diplomatic coup. The success paralleled what happened in the early 1970s when Egypt switched sides during the Cold War by transforming itself from a Soviet arms client to a buyer of mainly American arms. But in contrast to the perpetually aid-dependent Egypt, India buys US weapons with its own money.

Today, Washington is seeking to further open the Indian market for its businesses. And to suit US corporate interests, it is

pressing New Delhi to introduce regulatory and other legal changes, strengthen intellectual-property rights provisions, and initiate broader economic reforms.

Not content with the growth in arms sales — which have risen in one decade from \$100 million to billions of dollars yearly — the US is aiming to capture a bigger share of the Indian defense market. This objective has prompted Congress recently to propose that India be treated on par with NATO members for defense sales. The US is also seeking to revive its domestic nuclear power industry by selling commercial reactors to India.

India's size, location and capabilities position it as a counterweight to China and to the forces of Islamist extremism to its west. Yet, as Obama nears the end of his second term, his India policy bears no distinct strategic imprint. Indeed, critics argue that he has no real Indian policy and that his administration has betrayed a transactional attitude toward engagement with India.

Although Obama's 2015 New Delhi visit set a firm basis for moving the bilateral relationship forward, it was striking that, on his trip's last public engagement, he lectured the world's largest democracy on human rights. This was a subject on which he stayed mum at his next stop — tyrannical Saudi Arabia, which probably has the world's most odious political system.

The complexity of the US-India partnership is underlined by the fact that the US has little experience in forging close strategic collaboration with a country that is not its treaty-based ally. All of America's close milita-

ry partners are its treaty-linked allies. India is a strategic partner, not an ally, of America.

The structural difficulties in India-US relations are not easy to overcome. From the Indian perspective, America's reluctance to accommodate Indian interests on major regional issues, coupled with the fundamental challenge of managing an asymmetrical relationship, constantly test the resilience of the partnership.

For example, close counter-terrorism and intelligence cooperation between the US and India remains hobbled by America's continued mollycoddling of the Pakistani military and its rogue Inter Services Intelligence agency. There are doubts whether the US would fully share actionable intelligence on terrorist threats emanating from Pakistani soil against India because that would prompt India to pursue one of two options that Washington wouldn't like — either India counteracted the identified threat on its own or urged the US to do it.

Meanwhile, strategic weapon transfers, loans and political support allow China to use Pakistan as a relatively inexpensive counterweight to India. Yet, oddly, America also extends unstinted financial and political support to a Pakistan that has mastered the art of pretending to be a US ally while hosting those that kill US soldiers in Afghanistan, including the Taliban and Haqqani network. Under Obama, the US has made a financially struggling Pakistan one of the largest recipients of its aid.

Take India's other adversary, China, which also poses a geopolitical challenge for Ame-

India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj makes a point to Secretary of State John Kerry, as Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzler and Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, second from right and right respectively, and India's Commerce Minister Nirjala Sitharaman, left, look on at the first US-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue Leadership Summit, September 21, 2015.

rica. Both the US and India are keen to work together to control the potentially disruptive effects of the rise of an increasingly assertive China.

The US, however, seeks to use the China factor to draw India further into the American-led camp while remaining neutral on China-India disputes, including shying away from holding joint military exercises in Arunachal Pradesh. Washington has not criticized China's \$46 billion infrastructure-building plan to use Pakistan as its land corridor to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It also ignores China's egregious human rights violations.

The US seeks to counter China only where it directly challenges American power, as in the Pacific. In southern Asia, by contrast, US policy regards China as a virtual partner, including on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, Washington treats terror-exporting Pakistan as part of the solution when, to Kabul and New Delhi, it is at the core of the problem.

On the other hand, the US views Iran as part of the problem in the Af-Pak belt when the imperative is to co-opt Iran as part of the solution to help build stability in the volatile, terrorist-infested region.

Despite the US recently assassinating Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour through a drone strike in Pakistan's Balochistan province, Washington does not consider the Pakistan-backed Taliban as a terrorist organization. It is willing, as part of a peace deal, to accommodate the Afghan Taliban in a power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan. It assassinated Mansour because he defiantly and doggedly refused, despite US and Pakistani pressures, to enter into peace negotiations.



# ‘Is this a strategic partnership? We have enemies who do us less harm’

**‘CONGRESS IS MORE IN SYNCH WITH NEW DELHI’S FEELINGS THAN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION,’ INDIAN OFFICIALS TELL AJAI SHUKLA.**

**A**s Prime Minister Narendra Modi travels to Washington, the discussion agenda with President Barack Obama includes the widest ever range of issues ever discussed between India and the United States.

In January 2015, during Obama’s visit to India, the two leaders elevated their ‘strategic dialogue’ to a ‘strategic and commercial dialogue’, recognizing the centrality of trade and commerce in the relationship.

They also announced the ‘Delhi Declaration of Friendship,’ a strategic framework that built on the ‘Vision Statement’ announced during Modi’s previous visit to the US in September 2014.

Both countries agree that the defense relationship must be the locomotive that powers the strategic partnership. To that end, in 2015, the two sides signed the ‘Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship,’ a set of principles to guide and expand the bilateral defense and strategic partnership over the next decade.

Yet, beyond the signature ceremonies and banquet speeches, Washington and New Delhi are still feeling their way through a complex and evolving relationship.

Despite their common outlook on fundamental issues of identity, with both being liberal, free market democracies, there is lesser congruence in their strategic viewpoints.

Focused on the challenge posed by a rising China, Washington sees New Delhi as a natural ally, given the unresolved and frequently contentious Sino-Indian border and China’s undisguised support to India’s *bête noir*, Pakistan.

Adding to India’s charms is a large military, including a capable navy, that exercises sway across the northern Indian Ocean.

Small wonder then that when President Obama’s administration announced a ‘rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region’ in 2011, India was specifically named as a partner.

Even so, from New Delhi’s perspective the picture is more granular, marred by strategic mistrust that Washington’s *eye view* misses.

Indian policymakers retain the baggage of Cold War animosity, and recall the harsh US-led technology denial regimes that hamstrung Indian nuclear, space and defense scientists for decades.

New Delhi holds Washington partly responsible for Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capability, given that the Central Intelligence Agency turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s flouting of non-proliferation norms through the 1980s.

Nor is Pakistan-related resentment only historical. To New Delhi’s mystification, Washington still panders to Islamabad on Afghanistan, despite Pakistani support to the Taliban that killed and maimed thousands of Americans in Afghanistan.

In the hope that Pakistan would force the Taliban to the dialogue table, Washington has included it in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, while India remains cut out of a significant role in Afghanistan even after providing \$2 billion worth of humanitarian aid to that country.

New Delhi notes that the US supports Pakistan’s growing economic relationship with China, even though that brings together India’s two biggest adversaries.

Indians also bitterly resent Washington’s acceptance of



US and Indian soldiers conduct company movement procedures during the exercise Yudh Abhyas 2015 on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, September 21, 2015.

SERGEANT DANIEL SCHROEDER/US ARMY

India-focused terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan, even while insisting that Islamabad reins in jihadis operating along the Afghanistan border.

Finally, New Delhi seethes at continuing US financial and military aid to Pakistan, such as the recent sale of eight Block 50/52 F-16 fighters for ‘counter terrorist operations.’

So furious was New Delhi at Washington’s announcement of this sale, a week after Pakistan-based jihadists attacked India’s Pathankot air base, that India scrapped the inking of a major agreement — the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement — during Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s visit to India in April. That and another ‘foundational agreement,’ the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement, which have been agreed to in principle, remain on ice.

Scoffs a top Indian official sardonically: “Is this a strategic partnership? We have enemies who do us less harm.”

Another official says the recent refusal of US lawmakers to sanction aid to Pakistan for buying F-16s suggests “the US Congress is more in synch with New Delhi’s feelings than the US administration.”

Despite this divergence to the west, there is US-India convergence to the east, where New Delhi and Washington share a common strategic interest in dealing with the emergence of an increasingly belligerent China.

India regards its naval dominance of the Indian Ocean as a strategic hedge against any misadventure undertaken by Beijing on the Himalayan border.

India’s peninsular geography and the proximity of its naval bases to commercial shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean would allow it to interdict China’s commercial shipping in the event of hostilities; compensating for China’s logistical and communications advantages on the land frontier.

Washington, which wants a friendly India dominating the

Indian Ocean, has talked up the Indian Navy as a ‘net security provider’ and offered help in strengthening India’s navy. New Delhi has already inducted sophisticated American equipment like P-8I Poseidon maritime reconnaissance aircraft and is eager to obtain US assistance in building its next aircraft carrier.

This, and the establishment of common operating procedures in sophisticated joint exercises like the annual US-India-Japan Malabar series, could open the doors to linked American systems, like the F/A-18E/F naval fighter; and sub-systems like jet engines and aircraft launch and recovery systems. This would be a key subject of discussion during Prime Minister Modi’s visit.

Although eager to dominate the Indian Ocean, New Delhi is taking care not to get dragged into any Great Power confrontation in the South and East China Seas. In March, after the US Pacific Command chief, Admiral Harry Harris, looked forward starry-eyed to the day when ‘American and Indian Navy vessels steaming together will become a common and welcome sight throughout Indo-Asia-Pacific waters,’ India’s defense minister swiftly and unambiguously rejected the notion of joint patrolling.

Yet, New Delhi supports freedom of navigation through the South and East China Seas, since a large chunk of India’s trade flows through these waters. During Modi’s state visit to the US in September 2014, the two leaders agreed ‘to hold regular consultations on the Indian Ocean region,’ and affirmed the importance of ‘ensuring freedom of navigation and over flights throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.’

Beijing will be watching carefully to see if the Washington summit yields a stronger statement.



## When will US accommodate India's strategic interests?

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The assassination, ironically, exposes both Pakistan and America. The fact that the Taliban chief was killed inside Pakistan has contradicted years of denials by Pakistani officials that they were harboring Taliban leaders. Pakistan found its sovereignty violated again, after the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, by the power that still showers it with billions of dollars in aid.

As for the US, it has yet to offer an explanation as to why it took almost 15 years to carry out its first drone strike in Pakistan's Balochistan province, even though the Afghan Taliban leadership set up its command-and-control structure there after being driven from power in Kabul by the 2001 US military intervention in Afghanistan.

Against this background, no realistic assessment can focus merely on areas where the US-India relationship has thrived — such as US arms sales to India and booming bilateral trade — while ignoring US policies that compound India's regional security challenges.

In fact, India's one-sided defense relationship with the US, locking it as a leading American arms client, suggests that New Delhi has drawn no appropriate lessons from its protracted reliance on Russian weapon supplies earlier. Significantly, while US arms to India fall mainly in the category of defensive weapons — which simply cannot tilt the regional military balance in India's favor — Russia has over the years armed India with offensive weapon systems, including strategic bombers, an aircraft carrier, and a nuclear-powered submarine.

The paradox is that while India has emerged as the largest buyer of American arms, Pakistan is one of the biggest recipients of American alms. This suggests that US profits from arms exports to India help to lubricate US aid-to-Pakistan machine. Such US aid also bolsters China's strategy to box in India while encouraging Pakistan to diabolically sponsor cross-border terrorism.

It is the task of Indian diplomacy to build a robust bilateral relationship while ensuring that it advances, not weakens, the country's security interests in the region and beyond.

Indian diplomacy has failed to employ leverage from arms-import deals, greater market access to US businesses, and broader geopolitical cooperation to persuade the US to refine policies in southern Asia so that they do not adversely affect Indian security and to dismantle non-tariff barriers against Indian IT and pharmaceutical firms.

Indeed, New Delhi has not even tried to utilize the services of the large and increasingly influential Indian-American community. The mistake Indian diplomacy has made is to put the emphasis on bilateral summit meetings and lofty pronouncements to showcase progress. The American side has been happy to pander to this Indian weakness.

In fact, one reason the US is hosting Modi in the twilight of the Obama Presidency is to help smooth ruffled feathers. After all, Obama earlier this year unveiled \$860 million in new aid to Pakistan under the Overseas Contingency Operations fund, dubbed the 'slush fund' because it is not subject to the same oversight as the regular Pentagon and State Department budgets. Addi-

tionally, he decided to reward Pakistan with eight more subsidized F-16s, a subsidy burden Congress hasn't taken kindly to.

Moreover, ever since the 2005 nuclear deal, Washington has been promising to help facilitate India's admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and other US-led export-control regimes — a promise reiterated when Obama last visited India. However, the US has invested little political capital thus far to promote India's inclusion in these cartels. An emboldened China has now emerged as the principal opponent to India's membership, especially in the NSG.

And thanks to MTCR-related criteria in US export-control regulations, Indo-US space cooperation remains very limited.

In this light, the nice gesture of setting up Modi's address to Congress can be seen as an American attempt to pander to India's collective ego. India must capitalize on the symbolism of the warming ties with the US to expand the areas of bilateral understanding and cooperation while nudging America to be more accommodative of its vital strategic interests.

The promise of a strong, mutually beneficial partnership cannot be realized without concrete action.

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Much is made of India's decision to buy the CH-47F heavy lift helicopter. The paradox is that while India has emerged as the largest buyer of American arms, Pakistan is one of the biggest recipients of American alms.

COURTESY: US ARMY PHOTO BY JOHN PENNELL

## 'Is this a strategic partnership? We have enemies who do us less harm'

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The predictable, feel-good statements at the summit would include one about the US doing more joint exercises with India than with any other country. In May, the Indian Air Force participated again in the highly regarded Red Flag exercise in Alaska.

Another move forward would be an announcement that India will be associated with the US Central Command, in addition to USPACOM, with which it is currently associated.

Much will be made of India's decision to buy the CH-47F heavy lift helicopter, and the AH-64E Apache attack helicopter, but all eyes and ears will be perked up for news about India's purchase of 145 M777 ultra-light howitzers, a modest \$700 million contract.

New Delhi insiders say at least one "foundational agreement", the LEMOA, would be signed in Washington, while the signing of the CIS-MOA would await the Indian political reaction to this trial balloon.

The Defense Technology and Trade Initiative, set up in 2012 to facilitate US-India defense trade, could announce more joint development projects. In fact this would be ambitious, since the four 'pathfinder projects' announced during President Obama's visit to Delhi in 2015 have made little headway. Nor have two 'joint working groups' established for two ambitious collaboration projects — one to co-develop a high thrust jet engine, and another to design *INS Vishal*, a 65,000-ton aircraft carrier, possibly nuclear powered, for the Indian Navy.

In sum, there could be substantive forward movement on any of the issues on the US-India table. It would be mistaken to believe that the Obama administration, nearing the end of its term, would shrink from major decisions relating to India.

Given the positive bipartisan consensus on improving US-India ties, even a lame duck president (which Obama is not) could offer initiatives that a successor administration would honor without demur.

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A joint statement from Carter and Parrikar during the defense secretary's visit to India in April announced a new Maritime Security Dialogue and discussions on anti-submarine warfare and submarine safety. These flow from the pathbreaking 2015 Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region issued by Obama and Modi.

So where are Indo-US relations headed?

The potential for collaboration in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations between Indian and US forces is immense, but there is unlikely to be any joint patrol or joint operations by the two militaries given India's abhorrence to be seen as a US camp follower.

India will always try and nurture its defense relationship with Russia and European countries like France by keeping a slight distance from the US, which India's policy mak-

ers feel has been an unreliable partner in the past. The continued patronage extended by the US to Pakistan is a reality India cannot ignore despite the recent reports about Washington asking Islamabad to pay for the F-16s it wants from the US.

It is fair to assume therefore that India-US defense ties will be marked by some areas of convergence and some divergence in approach. Fortunately, the leadership on both sides is pragmatic enough to understand that

their worldviews don't always match, so neither expects the other to support blindly.

Within that constraint, the Pentagon and South Block are doing fine in taking defense relations between the US and India to the next level.

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