

India–US Relations in the 21st Century: Some Reflections

Rakhee Viswambharan

Abstract

The India-US relations has undergone a sea change after the 9/11 terrorist attack. Though the shared value system was prevalent between the world's largest democracy and globally the most powerful democracy, these bonds has been further solidified with a common security threat perception posed by international terrorism and expansionist policy followed by Communist China. The threat posed by non-state actors to the security of nation states added a new dimension to the national security strategy. No nations whatsoever powerful can ensure national security singlehandedly. Since both India and the US face the problem of threat from non-state actors, and share some common values they are better placed to involve each other and work towards ensuring global peace. Similarly, it is imperative to address effectively any challenge to a rule based international order, especially in the protection and promotion of free and unimpeded sea borne trade in an intensely globalized world. Thus at the macro level there are ample ground for convergence of national security threat perceptions. This paper is an attempt to examine the nuances of India – US relations in the 21st century especially in the context of changing dimensions of security and emerging security scenario especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Bilateral, Security, Indo-Pacific, Strategic, Counter-terrorism.

India – US Bilateral Cooperation

It is observed that the regular exchange of high-level political visits has provided sustained momentum to India-US bilateral cooperation, while the wide-ranging and ever-expanding dialogue architecture has established a long-term framework for India-US engagement. At present, the India-US bilateral cooperation is broad-based and multi-sectoral, covering trade and investment, defence and security, education, science

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and technology, cyber security, high-technology, civil nuclear energy, space technology and applications, clean energy, environment, agriculture and health.

A new vigor in the already existing India – US cordial relations has been visible from 2014, after the NDA II government under Shri Narendra Damodhar Modi assumed power in India. The frequency of high-level visits and exchanges between India and the US has gone up significantly including the ‘Howdy Modi’ and ‘Namaste Trump’ events held at Huston (2019) and Gujarat (2020) respectively. The vigor in India – US relations are visible especially in strategic and defence cooperation. It appears that the emerging international order is also in favour of cementing the bilateral relations between India and US.

Recently the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi and the US President Shri Donald Trump asserted to strengthen India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership, which as per the joint communique issued after two-day visit of the US President visit to India on 24 & 25 February 2020, is rooted in mutual trust and shared interests. One of the prerequisite for a stronger bilateral relation is mutual trust and shared interests. There are many areas in which there is convergence of interests between India and the US including adherence to international law and good governance; support for safety and freedom of navigation, overflight and other lawful uses of the seas; and unimpeded lawful commerce; and advocacy for peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law.

The convergence of interests is reflected especially in the Indo – Pacific region for a rule based order in the region. Thus the expansionist policy followed by the totalitarian regime in China has provided yet another opportunity to the democratic countries in the region to strengthen the bond of bilateral and multilateral interactions based on shared interests and mutual trust. In this context the emergence of QUAD as a forum to aggregate and articulate the common concerns of democratic nations that accept allegiance to international law and rule based international interactions. Thus the India – US relations is not only based on bilateral concerns and shared interests but it is also based on their common concerns regarding regional and international peace.

The India – US joint communique also stated that they pledged to deepen defence and security cooperation, especially through greater maritime and space domain awareness and information sharing; joint cooperation; exchange of military liaison personnel; advanced training and expanded exercises between all services and special forces; closer

collaboration on co-development and co-production of advanced defence components, equipment and platforms; and partnership between their defence industries. The identification of specific area for cooperation enhance the significance of the joint communique and its implications.

Further the affirmation on the part of the US that a strong and capable Indian military supports peace, stability, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, recognize India's major role in the region not as a spectator but as an active player. The intransigent attitude of Communist China in resolving maritime issues with smaller neighbours and the threat it posed to the sovereignty and security of countries in the region and China's reluctance to resolve bilateral issues based on well-established international rules aggravates the situation in Indo-Pacific region. Such a situation demands a close partnership between India and the US and it is central to a free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. It is the shared interests and mutual trust which prompted India and the US to maintain an institutional framework for constant strategic consultations.

a. Strategic Consultations

It is stated that there have been regular contacts at political and official levels on bilateral, regional and global issues. The Foreign Office Consultations, at the level of Foreign Secretary of India and US Under Secretary for Political Affairs, is an important part of the dialogue structure. Such a mechanism facilitates sharing of common interests and developing mutual trust. It appears that regular contacts at political and official levels on bilateral, regional and global issues further cement the relation between two leading functional democratic nations. The regular strategic consultations have also been placed on a solid platform of India – US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement of 2007.

b. Civil Nuclear Cooperation

The bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement was signed in October 2008. This agreement was given an operational dimension during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in September 2014, when the two sides set up a Contact Group for advancing the full and timely implementation of the India -US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, and to resolve pending issues. A decade old partnership on civil nuclear agreement was culminated when the two sides have started the preparatory work on site in India for six AP 1000 reactors to be built by

Westinghouse. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd, and Westinghouse are in talks toward finalizing the contractual arrangements, and addressing related issues. In addition to this the defence cooperation also shows an upward trend in India – US relations.

c. Defence Cooperation

The defence relationship has emerged as a major pillar of India-US strategic partnership with the signing of 'New Framework for India - US Defense Relations' in 2005 and the resulting intensification in defence trade, joint exercises, personnel exchanges, collaboration and cooperation in maritime security and counter-piracy, and exchanges between each of the three services. Again the Defence Framework Agreement was updated and renewed for another 10 years in June 2015.

The two countries now conduct more bilateral exercises with each other than they do with any other country. India participated in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in July-August 2016 for the second time with an Indian Naval Frigate. The bilateral dialogue mechanisms in the field of defence include Defence Policy Group (DPG), Defence Joint Working Group (DJWG), Defence Procurement and Production Group (DPPG), Senior Technology Security Group (STSG), Joint Technical Group (JTG), Military Cooperation Group (MCG), and Service-to-Service Executive Steering Groups (ESGs). And the agreements signed includes Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Association (LEMOA) signed in August 2016, Fuel Exchange Agreement signed in November 2015, Technical Agreement (TA) on information sharing on White (merchant) Shipping signed in May 2016 and the Information Exchange Annexe (IEA) on Aircraft Carrier Technologies signed in June 2016. The constant and steady cooperation in the defence sector further shows that there is mutual trust and shared interests in the bilateral interactions.

The aggregate worth of defence acquisition from U.S. Defence has crossed over US\$ 13 billion. Further India and the US, in tune with India's 'make in India policy', have launched a Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) aimed at simplifying technology transfer policies and exploring possibilities of co-development and co-production to invest the defence relationship with strategic value. The DTTI Working Group and its Task Force will expeditiously evaluate and decide on unique projects and technologies which would have a transformative impact on bilateral defence relations and enhance India's defence industry and military capabilities. During President Obama's visit in

January 2015, the two sides have agreed to start cooperation on 4 DTTI pathfinder projects and 2 pathfinder initiatives. Again during Indian defence ministers visit in December 2015, the two sides have also identified opportunities for bilateral cooperation in production and design of jet engine components. And during Secretary Carter's visit in April 2014, two more Gt2-G DTTI projects were added to the list. The DTTI meeting in Delhi in July 2016 decided to broaden its agenda by setting up five new Joint Working Groups on: Naval Systems; Air Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance; Chemical and Biological Protection; and Other Systems. And during the visit of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US in June 2016, it recognized India as a "Major Defence Partner", which commits the US to facilitate technology sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners, and industry collaboration for defence co-production and co-development. Thus in the defence sector the bilateral interactions shows an upward trend.

d. Counter-terrorism and Internal Security

The cooperation in counter-terrorism has witnessed considerable progress with intelligence sharing, information exchange, operational cooperation, counter-terrorism technology and equipment. The India-U.S. Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Initiative was signed in 2010 to expand collaboration on counter-terrorism, information sharing and capacity building. Again a Homeland Security Dialogue was announced during President Obama's visit to India in November 2010 to further deepen operational cooperation, counter-terrorism technology transfers and capacity building. As a follow up two rounds of this Dialogue have been held, in May 2011 and May 2013, with six Sub-Groups steering cooperation in specific areas. The two sides had agreed on a joint work plan to counter the threat of Improvised Explosives Device (IED). In order to further enhance the counter terrorism cooperation between India and the US, an arrangement was concluded in June 2016 to facilitate exchange of terrorist screening information through the designated contact points. Both India and US are confronted with terrorism, one of the major homeland security issue. Thus counter terrorism platform further provides an impetus to the India – US strategic cooperation.

India –US Strategic Partnership in 2019 -2020

The India-US strategic partnership witnessed rapid growth in 2019 with the two sides signing a crucial deal to facilitate the transfer of defence

technology and President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting a record four times post-May elections, displaying growing ties between the world's two largest democracies. The co-operation between India and the US has reached a new level when it comes to the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries are working with other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific to ensure that there is freedom of navigation and peace in the resource-rich region where communist totalitarian regime in China has been trying to spread its influence. The strengthening of the strategic partnership was reflected in the India-US Joint Statement issued after their second 2+2 dialogue which was the key highlight of 2019. The two countries signed a key agreement to facilitate the transfer of defence technology during the second 2+2 meeting in December in Washington, which was attended by their foreign and defence ministers. India, in tune with the US initiative in Indo – Pacific region, is supporting an institutional shape to Quad, an informal consultative mechanism along with Japan and Australia. Again, India and the US have started new tri-services exercise 'Tiger Triumph' in 2019, which will now be an annual affair.

One of the major objectives of the 2+2 talks between Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper with Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was furthering cooperation on a "free and open Indo-Pacific". During the talks in Washington, both countries had agreed to "promote practical cooperation in infrastructure development, cyber security, counter-terrorism and regional connectivity". To that end, the US has launched a "Blue Dot Network" which has already taken Japan and Australia on board to encourage private investment in infrastructure projects. The network is "ratings mechanism" that would grade infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region on different parameters to ensure transparency and is planned as direct counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The US also appreciates India's role as a net provider of security, as well as developmental and humanitarian assistance in the Indian Ocean Region. India and the US remain committed to sustainable, transparent, quality infrastructure development in the region. A joint effort by these two nations would not only address any threat to both the nations but also the regional and international peace and security. Since there is a marked qualitative and quantitative change with regard to threat to security of nations, it is imperative to form multilateral forum to address these issues in an effective and time bound manner. In this context India and the US, the two dominant players in the Indian Ocean region, has added responsibility to ensure peace and security. India's Indian

Ocean policy also undergone a marked change for elimination of external power presence to engagement with external powers in the region. Any challenge to a rule based order in the region can be effectively thwart by such joint efforts of democratic and peace-loving nations in the region.

Conclusion

The changing dimensions of security, especially due to the threat emanates from non-state actors, demand new strategies to ensure global peace and security. In this context India – US relations assumes great significance as the two leading democratic nations. Further the recent developments especially in the Indo-Pacific region strengthened the India – US relations. The emergence of Communist China in the region as a belligerent power threatening the security of small powers and also violation of international law provides scope for all democratic and peaceful nations intervention in the region under the collective security provisions. Again recently the Communist regime in China flex it muscle not only against India but also against Hong Kong, Taiwan and in the South China Sea. Thus the changing dimensions of security along with imperatives of the democratic nations solidarity for a rule based international order demand better cooperation among democratic countries. In this context the imperatives of cordial relation between world's largest democracy and the most powerful democracy cannot be overemphasized.

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