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## Looking Back at Three Decades of India-US Relationship

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Relations between India and the United States go a long way. In the words of former US Ambassador Dennis Kux, until the early 1990s, India and the United States were two “estranged democracies”.<sup>1</sup> As described by Sanjaya Baru, “emerging out of the Cold War cocoon, India had to work hard to redefine its economic, political and strategic links with the developed and developing worlds, examining old assumptions and discovering new opportunities and challenges”.<sup>2</sup> Because of the ideological polarisation, which had characterised international politics and India’s proximity with the USSR, the rapprochement with the United States was at the centre of this process and, to a large extent, its essence.

However, since the early 2000, all US administrations, from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump, have worked to build strong relationship with India, gradually encouraging New Delhi to assume a larger role in ensuring the security of the Indo-Pacific region. Directly and indirectly, they have helped India build its standing in Asia and despite India’s reluctance, established it as a balancer to China in the region.

Like previous administrations, Trump administration too sees India as an important component of its strategy for Asia. Economic, political and strategic relations between the two countries have spectacularly intensified yet the relationship is not without ambivalence. Despite, or because of, the ongoing dynamics, questions are arising on both sides regarding the future of this relationship.

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1 Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991*, Washington DC, National Defense University Press, 1993.

2 Sanjaya Baru, *Strategic Consequences of India’s Economic Performance*, New Delhi, Academic Foundation, 2006, p. 136.

If New Delhi finds reasons for satisfaction with some of the US policies (pressures on Pakistan being one example), it has also reasons for concerns mainly due to US's handling of relations with China and Russia, exacerbated by the consequences of the "America First Policy".

The present chapter examines the evolution of US-India relations since the early 1990s. It argues that current difficulties in the relationship are less the outcome of specific policies than the consequence of deeper structural issues related to both geography and asymmetry of power, and the exacerbation of the US-China rivalry. Previous US administrations had carefully calibrated their relations with China, allowing India to engage with China while simultaneously developing an increasingly stronger partnership with the United States. The tensions between these two partially contradictory aspects of India's policy remained, therefore, manageable.

President Trump's narrowly defined transactional policies vis-à-vis India and aggressiveness with China are making these tensions more difficult to handle, paradoxically pushing India to seek some degree of accommodation with China while needing more than ever to strengthen its partnership with the United States. In the process, New Delhi may have to redefine the quid pro quo that forms the basis of its partnership with Washington. Interestingly, India's cherished strategic autonomy, which for a long time acted as an obstacle to any significant rapprochement with the United States, may become a condition for the development of the partnership.

## **The Evolution of India-US Relationship since the Early 1990s**

Ideological proximity, not differences, had been one of the main reasons for the relative alienation between the two countries in the past. India and the United States have been deeply democratic countries but due to their abyssal asymmetry of power, too close a relationship between them would have entailed India losing its political and strategic autonomy.

Over a course of time, economic and strategic considerations ultimately prevailed and India's economic reforms of the early 1990s made it imperative for India to reach out to the US. However, it took some persuasion to convince American decision-makers of India's potential economic and strategic value for the United States particularly because

China was much more attractive for the US due to having carried out economic reforms 12 years earlier than India.

India's nuclear tests of May 1998 definitely changed the US perception of India and introduced a new dimension to the relationship. Washington quickly recognised that a strong India was in the US interest. As the pace and scope of China's rise increased, balancing became, according to Ashley Tellis, an "operational imperative", a requirement for "easing the burdens on Washington's 'forward defence' posture" in some parts of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> The United States found itself willing to work with India to balance the rise of Chinese power. India-US relations have evolved within this paradigm ever since.

India and the United States truly moved from estrangement to cooperation at the turn of the millennium. For the United States, India's reforms raised the prospect of the emergence of another sizable emerging market besides China. India saw partnership with the United States as instrumental to achieving economic success and promoting its acceptance as a regional and international actor. On both sides, economic considerations soon became intertwined with strategic policies.

The 1998 nuclear tests, justified by the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to President Bill Clinton on the ground of both Pakistani and Chinese threats to India, marked a qualitative change in the bilateral relationship. Initially a source of tensions, the tests did not lead to a new phase of international isolation. They did prompt, on the contrary, a political dialogue between New Delhi and Washington, signalling a new strategic reality. In the context of persistent dispute with Pakistan and growing discomfort with China, India's nuclear arsenal could no longer be ignored by the US and had to be taken into account in the US strategic calculations.

The relationship subsequently underwent several significant changes. The unanticipated change of posture of the US vis-à-vis Pakistan<sup>4</sup> led to President Bill Clinton's visit to India in 2000. In many ways this was a prelude to major inflexions in US policy in South Asia.

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3 Congressional Testimony, "Protecting American Primacy in the Indo-Pacific", Ashley J. Tellis, Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Senate Armed Services Committee, April 25, 2017.

4 In 1999, the US persuaded Pakistan to withdraw its troops from the Kargil heights located over the road linking Leh to Srinagar. The incident had led to the fourth war between the two countries.

## **The Centrality of the Rapprochement with the United States to India's Revival in Asia**

The consequences of the rapprochement have to be considered in relation with India's foreign policy in the whole of Asia and not just vis-à-vis China. In the early 1990, India took the initiative of reaching out economically, politically and strategically to Southeast and East Asia but countries like Indonesia or Malaysia remained reticent to let outside states intrude into Southeast Asia. It was only after India's rapprochement with the United States that Southeast Asia (as well as the US) called for a larger role of the Indian Navy in the region.

Therefore, Washington was instrumental in shaping New Delhi's interactions with other Asian capitals. In other words, closer relations with the United States greatly facilitated closer relations of India with the rest of Asia. Entertaining close relations with India were no longer seen as an act of defiance vis-à-vis the United States. Following Washington's move, Asian countries on China's periphery started to look at India both as a large potential market and also, much against New Delhi's own will, as a balancer to China. In that sense, it can be argued that the rediscovery of the United States by India was a key factor in ending its isolation in Asia.

In addition, the US also often provided a security umbrella, under which bilateral security relations could flourish. The rapprochement, however, had its own limitation. If it did contribute to establishing some degree of political trust between India and its Asian partners, it also did lessen the need for cooperation with India. In strategic terms, however, the proximity between Washington and New Delhi, underlined by a growing military cooperation between the two countries also brought US closer to its allies in the region for security reasons.<sup>5</sup>

## **The India-US Rapprochement and India-China Relationship**

Rapprochement with the United States did not just facilitate India's military relationships with India's Asian neighbours but also substantially changed the dynamics of India's relations with China. After decades of

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5 Limitations came from other factors as well. Except with China and Pakistan, India had few territorial disputes with most Asian countries. However, their strategic interests rarely overlapped. Similarly the lack of capabilities of India's partners of choices as well as its own inhibited for a long time any significant defense cooperation.

frozen relationships, India and China warmed up to one another realising that neither could afford a security competition in the new political landscape. Competitive dimensions between the two countries did not disappear but were subsumed within a larger spectrum of their relationships, which spanned across economic, political and military domains. Containment and balancing were indeed central in India's policy vis-à-vis China but engagement was no less important.

On Beijing's part it started to court India due to her closer ties with the US. Not surprisingly therefore, Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003 led to several important developments in the relationship. Both countries decided to engage in defence cooperation and agreed to hold their first joint air and naval exercises.<sup>6</sup>

Later in 2004, with the change of Indian government and the nomination of Manmohan Singh as the new Prime Minister did more qualitative change in the relationship with the United States came about – a fact evident from the successful conclusion of the US-India Civilian Nuclear Deal in October 2008. From then on, however, Chinese policies towards India became more rigid and frictions multiplied and the gap between India and China's capabilities kept increasing.

## India-US Relations and the Limits of “Offshore Balancing”<sup>7</sup>

Actual US expectations vis-à-vis India became clearer under the Obama administration. Expectations that India could, and should, assume a greater share of the burden of Asia's security, which would have been unthinkable until the early 1990s, were now expressed publicly. With the launch of the so-called '*Rebalance to Asia*' policy, encouraging India to focus on Asia and contribute to security of the Indo-Pacific region became a permanent feature of US diplomacy but such repeated US demands were

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6 Moreover, India acknowledged China's sovereignty over Tibet while China came to term with Sikkim's incorporation into India.

7 The offshore balancing strategy, which has been the subject of an intense debate in the 1990s in the United States can be defined by a willingness to balance regional balance of power from a distance. In concrete terms it meant building up the capabilities of a foreign partner without getting involved in the local conflict. Proponent of such a strategy argued that they combined the merits of isolationism and interventionism without the consequences of the latter. Jean-Loup Samaan, "l'offshore balancing américain dans le Golfe persique: vertus et limites d'une stratégie", *Revue d'Etudes Internationales*, Volume XLVII, No 2-3, juin –septembre 2016, 177-196.

systematically met by India's reluctance to assume a larger role in Asia's security.

Divergences did not stem from conflicting perceptions of China's behaviour but because of geography and asymmetry of power between India and China, on one side, and India and the United States, on the other. They did reflect Washington's own posture and actions vis-à-vis Beijing, only marginally accounting for the aspirations and security needs of other countries in the region. India, in the meantime, found it increasingly difficult to prevent getting caught in the zero-sum game between China and the United States but still did not intend to fight anybody else's war.

The election of Donald Trump prompted new dynamics. Prime Minister Modi sought a close relationship with the new President while pursuing a very proactive policy of engagement with the rest of Asia. The Trump administration did not question the value of the relationship with India and 'despite occasional moments of Presidential oddity',<sup>8</sup> has been more tolerant vis-à-vis India's demonstrations of autonomy.

Even so, the 'America First Policy' of the Trump administration increased the insecurity of US allies and partners, including India, mainly by antagonising China to a level that challenges the existing equilibrium in Asia.

It is necessary at this stage to clarify the distinction between the Obama and Trump administrations' policies vis-à-vis the Indian Ocean region as well as their consequences for India. The partnership between India and the United States had so far developed under the assumption of the latter's commitment to the security of the Indian Ocean. Despite repeated assurances by the Obama administration that US policies in the region had not changed, Indian trust in the reality of the commitment has been diminishing.

Growing insecurities were part of Delhi's larger scepticism about Obama's policies in Asia, in particular his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. They were also partly based on the relative decrease of the US military presence in the Indian Ocean as a result of the '*Rebalancing Towards Asia*' policy which, in practice, meant a shift of military assets from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. The Trump administration did not

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8 Andrew Small, "Fair Winds, Heavy Burdens: The Limitations of India's Turn East", *Asia Policy*, Volume 13, Number 2, (April 2018), 137-58.

fundamentally alter this situation and there was unquestionably a large degree of continuity between the two administrations.

However, Trump's antagonism towards China dramatically increased regional polarisation and India's insecurities. India perceived the risk of being forced to side with the United States and did not feel ready to face the potential consequences of such a situation with China. In such a context, it was easy for Beijing to increase the pressure on India's borders in an attempt to distance Delhi from Washington.

As a consequence, India has intensified its proactive policy of engagement with Asia, including China. Although India still aims at deepening the partnership with the United States, it does not intend to be trapped by President Trump's unpredictability and the dynamics of US-China relations.

## **Conclusion**

In Delhi's perception, any attempt by India to get closer to the United States must be accompanied by a parallel pursuit of further engagement with other Asian states. The more India demonstrates its willingness to share the burden of regional security, the more likely it is to convince Washington of its strategic worth and easier the cooperation will be.

In this context, India's insistence on 'strategic autonomy' is no longer an obstacle.

For most of its history, India has demonstrated wisdom in the management of its relations with its northern neighbour, therefore, it should be sufficient for the United States to provide India with the means to manage its asymmetry with China to fulfil the United States' own strategic interests.

The two countries have so far successfully navigated many hurdles in a historically complex relationship. The real risk, however, is that the 'America First' may evolve towards some sort of 'America Only' policy, pushing India's foreign policy into an untenable schizophrenia.

If such a situation emerges, India would inevitably be pushed, together with the rest of Asia, closer to Beijing. Such a situation, should it arise, would increase the risk of instability in Asia and can create serious dilemma for India. To put it simply, India will have to choose between a more belligerent posture or risk being pushed back to isolation it painfully got out of over the past 30 years.

India's margins of manoeuvre with the United States are, therefore, narrow. The preservation of a degree of autonomy will require more than skilful diplomacy. It will also require actual capacity to demonstrate its strategic worth to the United States and accept some balancing role in Asia. This, however, will be possible only if India's reforms are deep and fast enough to successfully manage its own asymmetry with China.