

## **The Proximate Causes for the New Indo-US Relationship**

By

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India's relations with the USA have undergone paradigmatic changes in the face of developments in the post-Cold War world.<sup>1</sup> In fact, India's recent positions on American foreign policy have been drastically different from previous years. Operation Desert Storm in 1991 found a staunch criticism in Indian political circles. However, the US' engagements in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 have been met with a more calm and reposed demeanour.<sup>2</sup> Further, New Delhi was entertaining the prospect of becoming a military partner in Afghanistan, but geographical proximity landed that distinction to Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

However, India's response to this disappointment was more diplomatic than could be previously envisaged. India denied military support in Iraq to the US, not through moral posturing, but through a clear and precise estimation of national security needs, which were felt to be overwhelming enough as not to warrant any third-party involvement in West Asia. Indian cooperation with Israel – the establishment of a full diplomatic relationship in 1991 and facilitation at the United Nations to overturn a resolution that equated Zionism with racism<sup>4</sup> - also brought it closer to the US.

In terms of military technology, there has been a conspicuous stance taken by India on the subject of the American proposal to develop the "Star Wars" program, which would essentially be in violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. India claims that the US should reserve the right of ascertaining its own security concerns, and take whatever measures it deems fit to guarantee national security. However, it could also be said that India wants to acquire similar technologies, to guarantee escalation dominance over Pakistan, and to thwart any nuclear blackmail on the part of China. Joint military exercises were also conducted to contribute to troop readiness, development and strategising, while the two navies jointly patrolled the Straits of Malacca.<sup>5</sup> There were several such initiatives: joint exercise of paratroopers in Agra, 2002; joint exercise of the Indian Army and US Special Forces in Ladakh, 2003; joint naval exercise of India's Southern Command and the US Seventh Fleet at the Arabian Sea, 2003.<sup>6</sup>

The principal factors behind the emergence of this new relationship are the world economy and nuclearism. For the US, India is now a power that can no longer be ignored, and must be brought under the hegemon's calculations. The manifestations of this convergence have witnessed the growing economic integration and the Indo-US "nuclear deal." However, the proximate causes may be identified in four core areas: an *appreciation of democracy, anti-terrorism, institutional frameworks*, and the *agency exhibited by India* in the international system, even under structural constraints.

The loose talk on democracy unfailingly identifies the US as the "oldest democracy" in the world and India as the "most populous." Operative democratic processes, however, are too complex and dynamic to be captured by epithets of this kind. Moreover, the variations in democratic structure between

the two countries abound,<sup>7</sup> while both countries suffer from their own democratic deficits.<sup>8</sup> But, the fact that the Indian democracy has survived while others around it have crumbled has strengthened international opinion about the country's political processes. A substantive consensus exists on the peaceful effects democratic nations have on their immediate external operational environments.<sup>9</sup> Though the pragmatism of this Kantian turn<sup>10</sup> may be debatable, the democratic path away from war is most certainly an attractive first base.

The 9/11 attacks have certainly changed the dimensions in which global terrorism is envisaged, but the same was never a novel threat to security for India in 2001. In truth, the seeds of this global phenomenon had existed for many years, though India's was one of the few voices that staked the claim. At the turn of the century, the US had come round to the increasing spate of terror (especially aimed at debilitating its wider national interests) and was in search of an able and responsible partner to launch a global counter-offensive: India's experience with militants in Kashmir and north-eastern India and the maturity it had displayed since going nuclear in 1998 made it a natural choice for the US.

If the building blocks for the proximate causes have been democracy and anti-terrorism, the cement to hold it all together has been supplied by the increasing number of bilateral institutions formed by India and the US.<sup>11</sup> Among the gamut of tie-ups, dialogues and cooperative ventures, the most prominent ones are: Next Step in Strategic Partnership (2004); Open Skies Agreement (2005); Defence Policy Group (2005); US-India Disaster Response Initiative (2005); Maritime Cooperation Framework (2006); US-India Economic Dialogue (2005); High Technology Cooperation Group (2002); the CEOs' Forum (2005); US-India Agricultural Alliance (2005); Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture (2005); Energy Dialogue (2005); and, the Bi-national Science and Technology Commission

(2006). This growing pool of institutions has increased the importance of either country to each other manifold.

The final proximate cause for the growing Indo-US relations is the agency that India has been able to maintain and display in international politics under structural constraints. Standard realist theory would argue that it would be difficult for India, if not impossible, to demonstrate any sort of independent foreign policy behaviour, given the structural pressures generated by the more dominant powers. However, India's response to the global non-proliferation regime singularly proves otherwise; India's external image exuded steel and determination, both qualities that serviced US doubts about India's capabilities in the post-Cold War era.<sup>12</sup>

The strategic implications of the changing relations between India and the US shall be borne out over the next decade; without the gift of hindsight, one can only purport to speculate on the direction and dynamic of the emergent alliance. Two aspects remain clear: firstly, India's great-power aspirations brings it closer to the US in the hope that the latter could be influenced enough to pave the way for reforms in the UN Security Council and the introduction of the former as a new permanent member. Secondly, India's allegiance to the US remains extremely crucial. Securing Indian goodwill and cementing ties with more institution building in the years to come, the US shall slowly develop an effective counter to any hegemonic aspirations that China might demonstrate in future. Investing in India makes room, too, for American companies and manufacturers to expand markets.

However, one shall do well to decipher the small print within the overarching camaraderie. The American interest may not just be to secure a

suitable defence against a Chinese offensive. By all accounts, India is still an “emerging” power; with its limited nuclear arsenal, domestic political pressures and rapidly expanding economic relations with China, it can only offer a stopgap resistance to any Chinese moves to upset the global balance of power. More importantly, the US knows this all too well. Its hidden intentions, instead, might be to lull India into a false sense of security and then compel the latter to rectify any rogue behaviour on the part of Pakistan. Washington has long defended and provided support to Islamabad, but now recognises that the domestic political scenario in Pakistan bears the potential of turning the state into a Frankenstein. In such a case, the US may consider keeping itself at bay and have India go in to clear the muddied waters.

On the other hand, Indian interests are most likely to circumvent every effort on the part of the US to bring it under the global non-proliferation regime. Every administration in New Delhi has held the Indian weapons program dear, and at no time should a compromise be envisaged, even if tacitly implied. India’s bid to become a major global power rests on its ability to bargain with the existing great powers, and the programme is India’s trump card: India shall vehemently hold onto it as long as it can.

Whatever the eventual outcomes of the changing Indo-US relationship, analysts on either side are convinced that the coming years shall provide a lot of excitement and furore; it remains to be seen, now, whether this emergent dynamism can be transformed into a long-term alliance or if the same fizzles out much before its potentials are realised.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Ganguly & A. Scobell, 2005, "India and the United States: Forging a Security Partnership?" *World Policy Journal*, XXII, 2.

<sup>2</sup> India has sought to carve out a "middle path" and not side either with the US or with Iraq. However, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, at a National Press Club interview in Washington D.C., was resolute in labeling Iraq a mistake:

<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0721-11.htm>

<sup>3</sup> S. Ganguly, 2003, "India's Foreign Policy Grows Up," *World Policy Journal*, XX, 4.

<sup>4</sup> A/RES/3379, 1975. Visit:

<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0a2a053971ccb56885256cef0073c6d4/761c1063530766a7052566a2005b74d1!OpenDocument>

<sup>5</sup> For further information and developments, visit:

<http://www.india defence.com/IN-US%20CO-OP.htm>

<sup>6</sup> For more information, visit: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6982367.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6982367.stm)

<sup>7</sup> Arend Lijphart, 1999, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Fareed Zakaria, 2003, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, New York: W. W. Norton.

<sup>9</sup> James Lee Ray, 1998, "Does Democracy Cause Peace?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1; Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, & Steven E. Miller (eds.), 1996, *Debating the Democratic Peace*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant first proposed that republican (democratic) countries are unlikely to fight one another. The reasons for his conviction are fleshed out in *Perpetual Peace*.

<sup>11</sup> For the entire list of bilateral partnerships, visit:

<http://www.indianembassy.org/newsite/indiausrel.asp>

<sup>12</sup> John W. Garver, 2002, *The China-India-US Triangle: Strategic Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research.