



Indo-US strategic partnership: Are we there yet?

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This paper was originally delivered as a keynote address at the Army War College, Mhow on 25 September 2006.

"Americans always do the right thing," said Winston Churchill, "after they have tried everything else". In the contest of India, it took the Americans five decades to do the right thing. These were the five decades of the Cold War, described by the late Senator Moynihan, a former American Ambassador to India, as a "half century of misunderstandings, miscues, and mishaps." Former External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh called them "the fifty wasted years".

India's strategic irrelevance to the United States

Even though they shared common values, India and the United States had divergent views on their respective roles in the world. The US saw itself as the leader of the Free World, fighting a crusade against the evil forces of international communism. India had no such phobia against communism and preferred to remain non-Aligned. An enduring image of the Cold War, in Indian minds, is that of John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State. Issuing a fatwa against non-Alignment, Dulles pronounced it immoral and declared it incompatible with friendship with the United States.

Dulles was reflecting what the US Joint Chief of Staff had concluded-that India was strategically irrelevant for the United States. Their ally of choice in the region was Pakistan. As Dulles pursued his 'Pactomania' and got Pakistan admitted to CENTO and SEATO, the political distance between Delhi and Washington continued to grow.

The Indo-US relationship, according to Strobe Talbott was "a victim of incompatible obsessions-India with Pakistan and America's with the Soviet Union." Both were Guilty of being on best terms with "each other's principal enemy". ²

Efforts at improving relations during the cold war

There were nevertheless brief periods of warmth and understanding, even attempts at forging strategic ties. At least three of these are worth nothing. In 1962, following the Chinese aggression on India, there was a clear convergence of strategic interests between India and the US. Setting non-Alignment aside, Pandit Nehru sought urgent military support from the United States, including two dozen squadrons of B-47 bombers, a dozen squadrons of fighter aircraft and air defence radars. The US responded with sympathy, but the military assistance offered was symbolic rather than substantive. The US administration was divided on India, with the Pentagon warning against a dilution of its strong ties with Pakistan. India continued to be strategically irrelevant to the US.

There were two other short periods of political cooperation-in the mid-80s and the early 90s, when Indian and the US set aside their frictions to discuss technology transfer and military cooperation. The MOU on transfer of Technology of 1985 and the Kicklighter proposals of 1991, which outlined "a common strategic vision", paved the way for the Agreed minute of defence cooperation signed during US Defence Secretary, William Perry's visit to India in 1995. The failure of such sporadic attempts to take bilateral relations to the higher plane suggests that they were still ahead of their time.

The Clinton years a breakthrough

Former Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott's book, "engaging India", provides a fascinating account of the process by which the US approach towards India evolved from estrangement to engagement. Talbott writes that India was cropping up frequently in Clinton's conversations in the very first year of his presidency and the Clinton regarded India a potentially important power for the US. It indeed Clinton felt that way, Delhi did not see much evidence of it. India felt the heat of Clinton's zeal in pursuing nuclear non-proliferation. The move to indefinitely extend the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was the last straw for India. In Talbott's words, the NPT represented for Indians "the three Ds of US nuclear policies: dominance, discrimination and double standards".

On the Kashmir issue, Washington continued to tilt towards Pakistan Clinton's newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Robin Raphel, even questioned the legality of Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India. Charges of human rights abuses against India were getting more strident. There was skepticism in India when Under Secretary of State; Tom Pickering offered a strategic dialogue with India, which he said, would cover the "whole gamut of relations".

And then, India's nuclear tests in May 1998, made such a dialogue irrelevant. Washington reacted by slapping punitive sanctions and took the lead in condemning India from the forums of the UN Security Council and the G-8.

From India's nuclear defiance, ironically, emerged the most intense, the most serious and the most extended set of exchanges between the two countries. I am referring to the Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott dialogue, which took place over two years in fourteen sessions in seven countries.

The dialogue helped to clear much of the debris of past misunderstandings and made Washington aware of India's national and global aspirations and its rationale for the nuclear tests. In Talbott's words, "India had put on notice that it was now unambiguously, unapologetically and irrevocably, a nuclear armed power."³ It was this realization which forced the Clinton administration to abandon its declared goal to "Cap, Rollback and Eliminate" India's nuclear programme.

The US offered India a grand bargain under which it would withdraw its nuclear and technology sanctions provided India met four benchmarks:

- Sign the CTBT
- Negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT)
- Enforce world class export controls on nuclear and missile and technology and
- Observe a non-threatening defence posture.

Although India had no serious problems with any of these requirements, the dialogue remained stuck on the benchmarks like a broken record and eventually ended in deadlock. Talbott conceded with some disappointment the Jaswant Singh managed to achieve his objectives whereas his own targets remained unfulfilled.

Failure for Clinton; success for bush

It is important to understand why the Clinton Administration's bold departure on India ended in self-confessed failure, and how George W. Bush, starting from where Clinton had left, converted the same policy into a spectacular success.

There are three major reasons that explain why Clinton did not eventually succeed with India. Firstly, in Clinton economics-driven global vision, China was a much bigger prize to be pursued than India. Clinton even sought to bring China into the South Asian equation, by suggesting that China could join the US to enforce peace in the region. India found this insensitive and deeply offensive. Secondly, the insistence on benchmarks made India resentful that the US Continued to treat it as a global delinquent. The benchmarks were seen as a penalty India had to pay in order to free itself from US sanctions. India felt no moral or legal obligation to pay such a price. And finally, what Clinton was offering to India was America's friendship, not a partnership on equal terms- and that too with a price tag. India was prepared to wait and see what his successor had to offer.

On the face of it, there was a seamless continuity of US policy towards India under George W. Bush in 2001. In fact, it appeared to be the only segment of Clinton's foreign policy that Bush did not repudiate and demolish. Beneath the surface however, there was an important change of approach.

Firstly, Bush did not perceive India as a lesser prize than China. Influenced no doubt by the Neo-Cons, Bush and his team considered India a counterweight and not a lightweight, against China.

Secondly, India was no longer regarded to be in the dock and there was no penalty to be paid for alleged misdeeds. India was seen as entitled to its rightful place in the world order. Condoleeza Rice proclaimed that the United States would facilitate India's quest for global status. Finally, Bush was offering more than a hand of friendship: he was keen to make India a strategic partner of the United States. This was truly a new beginning.

Defining the contours of the strategic partnership, the US National Security Strategy, 2002, declared that "the United States had undertaken a transformation of its bilateral relationship with India based on a conviction that US interests require a strong relationship with India." The document stressed the shared values of the two countries and their common global interests, which included (i) the free flow of commerce, especially in the "vital sea lanes of the Indian Ocean," (ii) fighting terrorism and (iii) creating "a strategically stable Asia".

While the US strategic vision was fixed on the long range and defined in global terms, the Indian outlook was focused on immediate priorities and tangibles. The negotiations were long and difficult, often abrasive. In the end, an agreement was reached in January 2004 in the form of the "Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership" (NSSP). To the satisfaction of the Indian side, it covered the trinity of issues of priority to India: Space, Nuclear Power and High Technology. With the conclusion of the NSSP, the bulk of the technology sanctions on India were removed by the Bush administration.

The Bush-Manmohan Singh strategic dialogue

The 2004 elections in both countries produced a new government in India under Dr. Manmohan Singh and a second term for George W. Bush in the US. The common message emerging from both capitals after the elections was continuity of foreign policy. In fact, both countries decided to take their strategic dialogue to the next level.

There have been three notable bilateral exchanges in the past eighteen months during the visits of Condoleeza Rice to Delhi in March 2005; of

Manmohan Singh to Washington in July 2005 and of George W. Bush to Delhi in March 2006.

Condoleeza Rice brought with her an outline of the second Bush administration's Grand Strategy for India. The US, she told the Indian Prime Minister, was willing to help India become a major power in the 21st century. And as a first step, the US would reverse three decades of its oppositions to India's nuclear programme and make civilian nuclear cooperation the centerpiece of the new relationship. While India responded favourably, it took time for the full impact of the American offer to sink in. No one understood better than Dr. Manmohan Singh that this was a historic opportunity for India to shed the burdens of the past and strike a new path to the future.

India formally accepted the American offer during the Prime Minister's visit to Washington in July 2005. The agreement announced on 18th July that year was more or less on India's terms. India was recognized as a "responsible state with advanced nuclear technology" i.e. a de facto nuclear weapon power. Both sides would take reciprocal steps to make their nuclear cooperation operational.

The US undertook to amend its domestic laws and persuade the Members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to resume nuclear cooperation and commerce with India.

The joint statement issued during the visit of President Bush to India in March 2006 was a follow up of the July 2005 agreement. It was a demonstration of India's seriousness in pursuing the strategic dialogue with the US.

Significance of the July 2005 agreement

The July 2005 joint statement has been analyzed threadbare by Think Tanks, political leaders and media commentators in both countries. I have been openly partisan in supporting the deal and will therefore spare you a catalogue of the pros and cons of the debate. Let me therefore offer a few observations on the political, economic and strategic implications of this historic agreement.

Politically, the July 2005 agreement is by far the most significant and far reaching understanding that India has reached with any major power, not excluding the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of 1971. It recognizes

India as a de facto nuclear power, clears the way for it to become a global power and strengthens India's claims for permanent membership of the Security Council.

From the economic point of view, it removed three decades of technological sanctions on India and offered multi layered cooperation with the world's most powerful economy. Most importantly, it widened the energy options for India and projected nuclear energy as a viable source of power for its expanding economy. Finally, in strategic terms, the agreement of July 2005 gave India enormous global leverage as a partner of the United States, especially in ensuring India's security in a turbulent neighbourhood.

Loss of autonomy?

There is persistent criticism that the July 2005 agreement has turned India into a satellite or a junior partner of the United States thus compelling India to subordinate its foreign policy to the global interests of the US. India's track record since Independence makes it an unlikely candidate for being the satellite or subaltern of any power of the world.

Despite the generous assistance given by the Soviet Union to India in almost all fields, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had the courage to say "no" to Breznev when he urged India to join the Asian Security Union. In 1994 and 1998, India defied the big powers collectively to conduct nuclear tests. More recently, India turned down an American request to send its troops to Iraq. As Ashley Tellis told a committee of the US Congress on 16 November 2005, "India's large size, its proud history, and its great ambitions, ensure that it will likely march to the beat of its own drummer."

The China factor

There is speculation on whether or not China has been a factor in the emerging strategic relationship between India and the United States. Official denials notwithstanding, both countries have reasons to be concerned about the future role of China on the global scene. India's national psyche still bears the scars of 1962, despite the efforts to normalize China-Indian relations since 1988. China has proliferated missile and nuclear technology to Pakistan, and continues to be a major source of weaponry for that country. Further, India is deeply troubled by China's "string

of pearls" policy of setting up military and naval facilities in India's vicinity, especially in Myanmar and Pakistan.

The Americans are equally concerned about China's unpredictable behaviour. The Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) published recently by the Pentagon identifies China as the only potential long-term military threat to the US.

While nobody is suggesting that India and the US should join in militarily "containing" China, there is obvious convergence of interests in both countries exchanging notes and in keeping a wary eye on China's policies and actions. Hence, the significance of the reference in the US National Security Strategy 2002 to the common interests of both countries in "a strategically stable Asia."

Growing military relations

An account of the Indo-US strategic relationship will be incomplete without a reference to the remarkable growth of military cooperation between the two sides. This is indeed the most visible manifestation of the new partnership. In a complete reversal of their Cold War attitudes the two countries have conducted joint military exercises covering maritime interdiction, search and rescue operations, anti-submarine warfare, air combat, airlift operations, mountain warfare, jungle warfare, disaster management and peacekeeping operations.

The US has, in contrast with the past, opened its doors to India to procure state-of-the-art military weapons and technology. This includes fire-finding radars, GE 404 engines for the Light Combat Aircraft and electronic ground sensors for use on the LOC in Jammu and Kashmir and counter-terrorism equipment for our Special Forces. On offer as well are advanced jet fighters for the Air Force, the US-Israeli Phalcon early warning system, the Patriot PAC-3 missile defence system and many others.

The conclusion of a 10-year framework agreement on defence cooperation during Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Washington in June 2005 is further evidence of the expanding scope of military cooperation with the US.

Strategic partnership: Are we there yet?

The question at this critical phase in the strategic

partnership with the United States is, are we there yet?

Not quite. The partnership will be effective only when it is more visible on the ground in both countries. There is still a wide gap between the declarations and their implementation. Action in many of the declared areas seems to be faltering. For example, the Indo-US Global Democracy Initiative, announced with great fanfare in July 2005 remains a dead letter. Similarly, the US Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which seeks to Monitor and interdict clandestine movement of WMD material, is yet to find a response from India. Terrorism, another core area of cooperation, remains in limbo.

It would be more accurate therefore to describe the current period of our bilateral relations as a phase of transition towards a strategic partnership. There are still outstanding issues, which, if not addressed, will not only prolong the transition, but may even threaten the very concept of partnership. Two of these issues are general in nature; others are single issues on which difference persist.

Outstanding differences

The first is the historical legacy of suspicion and mistrust in both countries, which remains amongst influential pockets of political leaders, civil servants and commentators. It is a residual mindset of the cold war years that surfaces from the time to time with fierce intensity, as during the debates on the 2005 agreement. In India, antipathy to the US has brought together mutually opposed political groups like the Communists, the BJP and Islamic Groups. In the absence of a national consensus, there will be stiff political opposition at every step of the road towards the strategic partnership with the US.

The second general issue relates to the divergent visions of the two countries and the way they view their respective global roles. The American scholar, Arthur Rubinoff has commented: "Ironically, now that the United States recognizes a regional imperative in a nuclearized South Asia, India considers itself a global rather than regional power. The United States remains a "status-quo" nation while India, which has never been comfortable with a world dominated by Washington, is in many ways a revisionist state."⁴

This is echoed by Professor Varun Sahni, who says that "the interests of an emerging power and that of a hegemonic power are likely to be incompatible in the medium-to long term." Thus there will be, "natural limits" to the security cooperation between "natural allies."⁵

For three specific issues that remain outstanding are Pakistan, Terrorism and India's aspiration for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

For over five decades Washington's policy towards South Asia was a zero sum game, which hyphenated India with Pakistan. The Bush administration has declared an end of both the hyphenation and the zero sum game. It claims that US relations have improved dramatically with both India and Pakistan, neither of them resenting its close ties with the others. This is somewhat exaggerated.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States was accused by India of practicing double standards. While the US condemned India for practicing human rights abuses, of hostility towards Israel and engaging in nuclear proliferation, none of the same issues seemed to matter in America's approach towards Pakistan. Washington turned a blind eye as Pakistan developed a nuclear weapon program and proceeded to export its technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran.

Washington current policy of equidistance and equi-friendship with Pakistan still smacks of double standards for India. Proclaiming India a strategic partner and Pakistan a major non-NATO ally may be clever diplomacy, but that does not inspire trust in India.

Related again to Pakistan are fundamental differences on the issue of terrorism. In November 2001, President Bush, addressing American troops in Kentucky, declared, "America has a message for the nations of the world. If you harbour terrorists...train or arm a terrorist...feed and fund a terrorist...you are a terrorist and will be held accountable by the United States." Pakistan continues to do all the above and is nevertheless rewarded with military and economic largesse by the United States. Washington's refusal to treat "jihadi" terrorism in India at par with global terrorism reinforces the charges of double standards.

Finally, India finds it hard to appreciate the reluctance of the US to support India's bid for permanent membership of the Security Council.

In September 2005, the US announced at the UN General Assembly that the US would join in reconstituting a Security Council that "looks like the world of 2005." It then listed the seven criteria by which the US would judge potential members: (i) commitment to democracy and human rights (ii) size of economy (iii) size of population (iv) military capacity (v) financial contributions to the UN (vi) contribution to UN peace keeping and (vii) record on non-proliferation and counter terrorism.

I recall commenting at that time that the criteria seemed to be drafted in south Block, New Delhi, considering how closely they fitted India. Why then does the US not endorse India when Britain, France and Russia have publicly extended their support? The standard US response has been that the hence the time for endorsing potential members has not arisen as yet. In that case, why is Washington projecting Japan as a potential member of the Council?

Conclusion

Though they appear formidable, none of these problems are insurmountable. In the last six years, India and the United States have learnt to deal with their differences with sensitivity, patience and understanding. More of the same will be required by the leadership of both countries in the years to come. Coalition politics will continue to generate pressure on the government in India and slow down the decision making process. The prospect of a presidential election in the US after two years is bound to raise concerns about the continuity of the current administration's policy on India. I nevertheless remain convinced that closer bilateral cooperation will be insulated from partisan politicians in both countries. The destinies of our two great countries are interlinked and the strategic partnership between them will be one of the defining features of the 21st century.

Notes:

1 Defining 'strategic': The loose and indiscriminate usage of this term has made it difficult to define. "Strategy" originated as a military expression describing the science and art of planning victory in a war. Hence strategic planning was differentiated from tactical or day-to-day deployment. Currently, the term is used in international affairs as a global, long term and

comprehensive relationship between two countries. In a slightly narrower sense it also refers to a security relationship, including military cooperation. I have used both concepts in this paper.

2 Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb* (New Delhi: Viking, 2004) p.7

3 *ibid*, p.51.

4 Rubinoff, Arthur "Incompatible Objectives and Shortsighted Policies: US Strategies Towards India" in "US-Indian Strategic Cooperation into the 21st Century" Ed. Sumit Ganguly et al. (Routledge, 2006) p.54

5 Varun Sahni "Limited Cooperation between Limited Allies: India's Strategic Programs and India-US Strategic Trade", in "US-Indian Strategic Cooperation into the 21st century, *ibid*. p. 188



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