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A New Era in US-Indian Security and Defense Relations?

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For the United States, India is an essential cornerstone of the future security architecture in Asia. On June 28, 2005, the US Defense Minister Donald Rumsfeld and his Indian colleague, Pranab Mukherjee, signed the *New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship*, which is supposed to put the security and defense relations of both countries on new footing. To what extent does this proclamation really mark a new "era" in the American-Indian security relationship? What implications does this development have for European foreign and security policy?

Since the mid-1990s, the US and India have been expanding their cooperation in matters of security. In 1995, both sides signed an Agreed Minute on Defense Relations, in which they established stronger military cooperation and the technological exchange of military-related materials. However, because of the Clinton administration's negative reaction to India's 1998 nuclear testing and the subsequent reprimand of India by the UN Security Council, the agreement came to little.

In contrast, after 2001 the Bush administration gave the inclusion of India in regional security and defense-related matters a much higher priority. The reasons for this are clear: from the American perspective, India will have a key role in the new composition of the regional order in Asia. Its enormous economic and military growth potential, as well as its democratic system, predestines the country, in Washington's eyes, for a role as strategic partner in confronting the new challenges in the region. The Bush administration sees India as a possible counterweight to a rising China. Moreover, India and the US have common interests in southern Asia, which stretches from the Middle East over Central Asia to Southeast Asia. High among these are the war against terrorism and measures to prevent the proliferation of atomic, biological and chemical weapons (ABC Weapons) and their delivery systems.

In late April 2005, US Secretary of State Rice explained that it is a goal of American foreign and security policy to support India on its path to becoming a "major power of the 21st century." Behind the intention to integrate New Delhi into its security framework, there was Washington's growing recognition that the political and military power of the US is going to be limited in this new regional order. For this reason,

close cooperation with old and new security partners is a priority of US Asian strategy.

Stronger Security and Defense Cooperation

Since the Bush government assumed office there has been an intensification of defense-related cooperation between the US and India. In the first phase of a program called *Next Steps in Strategic Partnership* (NSSP), they agreed upon initiatives to strengthen military cooperation and considered an exchange of US military technology with India. The most progress so far has been in the field of military cooperation, with ten joint exercises being conducted since 2001. Moreover, the Indian navy has participated in the US-led international alliance against terrorism and has escorted American maritime assets through the Malacca Straits into the Arabian Sea. India also supported the American plans to establish a global ballistic missile defense.

The newest agreed upon framework for American-Indian defense-related cooperation, which will extend for 10 years, is a part of the second phase of NSSP. It expands the common security and defense initiatives and foresees others as well, including:

- common efforts to support regional and global security;
- cooperation in multinational operations, fighting terrorism and measures against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- joint and combined exercises and exchanges;
- cooperation in establishing the capabilities to carry out peacekeeping;
- expanding cooperation on armament, including ballistic missile defense; and
- the establishment of a common working group called the Defense Procurement and Production Group for the purpose of defense trade.

American Interests

The aforementioned agreements are only to be understood in the context of American policy in southern Asia. After the Cold War, Washington decoupled the relationship between India and Pakistan. Indeed, Pakistan remains after 11 September 2001 an important regional ally in the war against international terrorism. But in the strategic considerations of the White House as to the future stability of the entire Asian region, India plays a much larger role. An October 2002 US Defense Department strategy paper emphasized the necessity of closer defense cooperation with India. For one, the Indian armed forces should contribute to the relief of the Americans in military operations—in particular in peacekeeping measures and in the protection and surveillance of the vital Sea-Lanes of Communications—a responsibility that has been limited to date because of deficient interoperability between the two armed forces. But the US also has the long-term intention of bringing India into a new network of formal and informal alliances in order to establish it as a possible military counterweight to China.

In doing so, the Bush government reverses the former US position on a number of controversial issues in US-India relations. For Washington, India's compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) is no longer an unconditional requirement for close security-related cooperation. The US has accepted India's status as a nuclear power and even put cooperation in the field of civilian nuclear energy in sight. Moreover, the Bush government is trying to establish a new set of conditions for Indian compliance in the field of non-proliferation. After India participated in the so-called Container Security Initiative (CSI) to identify and examine maritime containers that pose a risk for terrorism, it is Washington's wish to integrate New Delhi in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which aims at stopping the shipment of ABC-weapons and their delivery systems.

Nevertheless, the American side has put some limitations on even closer military

cooperation with India. The main problem is the restrictive policies of the US concerning the transfer of sensitive military technologies. Apart from pressure of influential lobbyists in the domestic arms industry, there are doubts in Washington about whether India will employ these technologies the right way. This has led to the situation that Israel, and not America, is India's most important partner for arms sales after Russia. Also, this makes deepened cooperation in the field of ballistic missile defense increasingly difficult. The problems, however, are overwhelmingly of a technical nature. All in all, there exists a broad consensus in the security community in Washington about the relevance of India as a strategic partner and on the Bush administration's chosen course toward India in general.

Indian Problems

While the closer security and defense relationship with India has seamlessly drawn the country into the US's geo-political Asian strategy, this new relationship raises some fundamental questions for India. During the 2003 Iraq war, for example, there was discussion in New Delhi about whether it should support the American course by sending troops to Iraq. The governing Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dropped a plan to do so after protests from the Congress Party and the left-wing parties.

Today there is renewed criticism from the side of the communist parties (which since 2004 support the minority government of the United Progressive Alliance, or UPA) against an overly close attachment of India to the US. Above all, the parties are critical of the UPA for signing the New Framework, which, they charge, undermines the principle of an independent Indian foreign policy, which was agreed upon in the coalition contract. Critics fear that India could in the future be drawn into US military "adventures," against for example Iran. In addition, the agreement does not contain any reference to the UN, which is important to India, not least because India has the largest worldwide contingent of blue helmets.

In light of the tenor of the domestic discourse, it is hardly surprising that the government is touting, above all, the uses of the exchanged military technology and other technologies for India's benefit. The modernization of the Indian armed forces is aimed at increasing its power projection capabilities. India's military doctrine refers explicitly to the necessity of having its armed forces play a greater role in the Asian region. Indian security experts also warn of a possible encirclement by China, which has been intensifying its activities in Myanmar and Pakistan for years, and which has supported Pakistan's military build-up. The new naval doctrine thus foresees the development of a blue-water navy, which in the long-term could hold China back.

Simultaneously, however, Indian foreign policy since the nineties has oriented itself increasingly toward China both politically and economically, a course which has been pushed by the Hindu-nationalist BJP and is being implemented today by the UPA government. Also, in the meantime, India has observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which at its most recent summit meeting declared that the US must publicly establish a timeline for the withdrawal of its troops from Central Asia. In addition, in their first common meeting in Vladivostok in July 2005, the foreign ministers of India, Russia and China underlined their commitment to a multipolar world order thereby implicitly criticizing the US-dominated structures of the international system.

In light of the multilateral tradition of Indian foreign policy and its hitherto unsuccessful bilateral interventions, it is not likely that India, behind the leadership of the United States, would participate in a military conflict that had not been legitimated by the UN. This would put any Indian government in hot water domestically because it would call into question the

foreign policy consensus that exists among all of the political parties. In public discourse, the defense minister, Mukheerjee, has been trying to avoid giving the impression that the New Framework is an agreement that restricts India's foreign policy latitude. In reaction to charges along these lines, India has publicly rejected the American offer to send permanent liaison officers to two of their regional commands, Central Command (CENTCOM) and Pacific Command (PACCOM).

That said, however, the new agreement is a further step toward a strategic partnership between India and the US. Washington is clearly pursuing a long-term policy of establishing India as a cornerstone of a new strategic stability in Asia. On its own behalf, India wants to take advantage of stronger technical cooperation with the US. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Indian government is prepared to sign up to the US's greater geo-strategic vision for Asia.

Implications for Europe

With the framework agreement, India and the US significantly expand their cooperation in the field of military technology. But because India is pursuing a diversification of its military stock, the ongoing military cooperation with countries like Germany and France will not be affected.

Politically, however, the EU will lose ground in terms of India as a possible partner in its foreign and security policy. The EU's June 2004 proposed guidelines for a strategic partnership with India included questions about international strategic policy, conflict prevention and human rights. In its answer to the EU, India signaled that it sees Europe as an important partner for trade and in economic issues but that in terms of security and defense policy it will look to cooperate more closely with the US.

Still more important for Europe, the latest developments in US-Indian security relations mark a fundamental change in Washington's nuclear nonproliferation policy. During a visit from India's Prime Minister Singh in Washington in July 2005, President Bush agreed to share civilian nuclear technology with New Delhi, even though India is not a signatory of the NPT. The Bush administration no longer sees India as a part of the "nuclear" problem but rather as part of a solution. This has been reinforced by India's reciprocal decision to allow inspections of all its civilian nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities from one another. This move will help to convince Congress to support Bush's initiative as well as put pressure on the multinational Nuclear Suppliers Group, whose support is also needed for the deal to happen. Already, the head of the IAEO, Mohammed ElBaradei, has declared his support for Bush's plan. Consequently, Germany and the EU will have to discuss seriously how to deal with countries like India, which have nuclear capabilities but are not members to the NPT.

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