

Back to the drawing board on US–India relations?

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The US–India strategic partnership is either the most underperforming bilateral relationship in the world or its most overrated. As a new chapter in this relationship is opened with the formation of a new centre-right government in New Delhi and the [back-to-back visits by John Kerry and Chuck Hagel](#) ^[1] in late July and early August, it is imperative that the path that is charted ahead is informed by the lessons of the past decade and a half.



It was assumed that with the passing of the bipolar international order and India's own [shift towards market economics](#) ^[2], the traditional commonality of democratic values, complemented by an increasingly robust set of inter-societal ties, [would accentuate a dramatic convergence](#) ^[3] of national interests between the two countries.

In the Indo-Pacific region, Washington and New Delhi (and the other major maritime democracies) would be bound by a [common interest](#) ^[4] in countervailing Chinese power, curbing nuclear proliferation, participating in non-traditional security missions and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and securing the global commons, especially the sea lines of communication. A generous civil nuclear deal was bestowed on New Delhi to consummate this blossoming relationship. Down the line, [it was hoped](#) ^[5] that India might even provide 'over-the-horizon' rotational facilities for US forces to manage contingencies that might arise in West and East Asia.

Little of this bold agenda has come to pass.

Far from growing into its designated role as America's deputy sheriff in the Indian Ocean region (and perhaps someday thereafter as a co-partner across the Indo-Pacific region), New Delhi

has doubled down on its autonomist leanings. It has resisted participating in major multi-service combined exercises that prepare for high-end operational missions; stayed away from stationing personnel at US combatant command headquarters; turned down a series of foundational pacts that would have enhanced logistics and battle-group networking; opted for Russian rather than US high-precision, military-grade navigation signals; opted to strip out tactical interoperability aids (high-end electronics and avionics suites) after purchasing US-origin platforms (P8I and C-130J aircraft); and [even allegedly passed up the opportunity](#) ^[6] to get a to-be-decommissioned supercarrier — the *USS Kitty Hawk* — for free!

Defence ties with Japan and Australia too have been limited to the odd naval exercise from time to time, with little scope for logistics sharing or information exchange envisaged. The only tangible achievement, despite vigorous efforts, has been US\$15 billion of [American defence hardware sales](#) ^[7].

The disappointments do not appear to have tempered the belief of the faithful. Undaunted, they argue that with the departure of the previous government and its long-serving, proto-socialist defence minister, [US and India](#) ^[8] defence ties stand poised to once again break out of the policy stagnation of the past few years. According to this school of thought, Washington should reauthorize and update their 2005 Defense Framework agreement to enable collaboration in multinational operations of common interest. Washington should prioritise military intelligence exchanges and formalise institutional links so as to share classified information on the region. It is also thought that Washington must deepen service-to-service engagements and incorporate service chiefs and regional commanders within institutionalised policy mechanisms. Washington should use the recent Defense Trade and Technology Initiative to take the defence sales relationship beyond the buyer-seller model to one of co-development and co-production.

Each of these agreements and activities is worthy in its own right; equally, on each of them except co-production, the Indian defence-military establishment has shrunk from participating jointly with the US during the past decade or has let the arrangement lapse — despite possessing the legal flexibility to cooperate.

In important respects, the same questions that went unanswered 15 years ago remain applicable today: what is the template by which one operationalises a defence partnership with a critically important country that will never be a treaty ally (and is the primary antagonist of a 'non-NATO ally', Pakistan), yet is more than just a friendly, non-hostile state?

Can enhanced defence cooperation and technology handouts infuse a strategic congruence or must the causality run the other way? If technology sharing boosts India's autonomous defence capability, then does it not detract from the purpose of deepening the partnership? If New Delhi of its own accord bears a larger share of the region's security burden, what is its imperative to also simultaneously increase cooperation with US forces in the region?

The [civil nuclear deal](#) ^[9] and the mainstreaming of New Delhi within the international dual-use technology-sharing regime at a moment of US primacy did not furnish the desired answer to these questions. In the more constrained age ahead, it is not clear why New Delhi's strategic calculation will change any more favourably. Although China's rise and behaviour could supply

such a rationale, Beijing is a key pivot in India's multi-aligned foreign policy strategy and successive governments in New Delhi have seen greater wisdom in operating in the slipstream of Beijing's meteoric rise than by aligning against it. That most observers continue to implicitly — and smugly — base the 'natural' convergence of US and Indian interest in Asia on the belief that China and India are irrevocably locked in strategic competition may, to the contrary, provide a hint as to why Washington's relationship with New Delhi has serially fallen short of expectations in the first place.

The [future of US–India strategic ties in Asia](#) ^[10] and the world in the 21st century is too important to be constructed solely or even primarily through a China-management lens. The defence cooperation elements within this relationship — joint exercises, intelligence exchange, arms deals, technology-sharing, weapons co-development and co-production, and so on — should be constructed on a pragmatic, interest-based foundation that is geared to nudging the Indo-Pacific region's multilateral security relations towards a more consociational model of international relations where power is shared and balanced within.

Embracing this balance between autonomy and alignment in the US–India strategic partnership will also lock the two countries in a strategic embrace that will favour a stable geo-political equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific region.

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[1] back-to-back visits by John Kerry and Chuck Hagel:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/08/12/kerry-hagel-visits-set-agenda-for-obama-modi-meeting/%3E>

[2] shift towards market economics:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/05/28/modi-a-shot-in-the-arm-for-indian-economy/>

[3] would accentuate a dramatic convergence:

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub755.pdf>

[4] common interest:

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61730/ashton-b-carter/americas-new-strategic-partner>

[5] it was hoped:

http://complex.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/29/us_deploying_jets_around_asia_to_k

eep_china_surrounded

[6] even allegedly passed up the opportunity:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/014/772agroh.asp>

[7] American defence hardware sales:

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb271.pdf>

[8] US and India:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/01/18/us-india-ties-in-need-of-serious-work/>

[9] civil nuclear deal:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/02/03/the-japan-india-strategic-equation-is-not-working/>

[10] future of US–India strategic ties in Asia:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/19/rebalancing-asia-panetta-visits-india/>

[11] here: <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1467.pdf>