

Associate Paper

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India, the United States and South Asia: Potential Strains and Complications

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Key Points

- The US is beginning to be seen as not doing enough to support India in the post-Cold War era. Reports emanating from both public and political fora refer to US engagement with individual countries in South Asia, possibly behind the back of India and with indifference to anti-India sentiments in those countries; this could become a cause of strain in India-US relations.
- The “String of Pearls” theory, which has demonised China in the Indian mind, may have to come in for review. Already, India is revisiting its neighbourhood policy, established in the years immediately after the Cold War, to reassess and reassert its traditional supremacy in the region.
- A coalition government in India after the poll scheduled for May 2014, could initiate a review of India’s foreign policy and geo-strategic priorities in the short-term, over the head of the two “national parties”, the ruling Congress and the opposition BJP, which seem to have developed some kind of a bipartisan approach on national issues, although that has not always held.
- Bilateral relations with India offer substantial possibilities for the US, but other possibilities have also opened up for India. Even while continuing with a policy of “cautious optimism” towards each other, India and China seem to be adopting the step-by-step realisation of a calibrated normalisation of bilateral ties, which, however, may take some time to come.

Summary

After several incidents occurring close together, there is the possibility of strains appearing in India-US relations if the trend is not arrested. It requires a “message” to reach the Indian public, over the heads of their “managed” political leaderships. This could lead to public pressure on the leaders in ways that America does not always understand. One incident concerns reports of the ‘US acquiring a military base in Maldives’, which has been stoutly denied by Washington. Ahead of presidential polls later this year and parliamentary elections in the next, Maldives has since indicated that it cannot approve the US draft and that it’s in no great hurry to conclude it. The other relates to the creation of a congressional caucus in the US on the forgotten “Khalistan issue”, from independent India’s none-too-distant past. A more recent, third episode refers to reports that India is fifth in the rank of countries that US intelligence agencies are hacking the internet services of and eavesdropping on at a global level.

Analysis

On all the above issues, the bipartisan political leadership at the national-level in India may not have fully understood American intentions, or compulsions. On the Maldivian issue, US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake, no stranger to India, where he was the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) not very long ago, has denied news reports of a military-base. US officials have also been reported as saying that the US has taken India into its confidence on what it intends doing – and not doing. The former Maldivian President, Mohammed Nasheed, a self-proclaimed “friend of India” in the island-nation, where he is contesting the September presidential polls, has, however, raised questions.

The government of President Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik did not come up with a satisfactory explanation immediately, but seems to have put the entire exercise on hold, at least until the US clarifies its expectation to the satisfaction of the divided Maldivian polity and people. In between, two successive Attorneys-General in Maldives, including incumbent Aishath Bisham, have advised the Waheed Government that it needed parliamentary approval for any agreement of the kind with a foreign government. The issue can divide the tentative ruling coalition, and Parliament even more – and can be used to whip up nationalist sentiments after the “GMR issue” involving the Indian infrastructure major, apart from “Islamic/Islamist sentiments” targeting the US, in particular.

Back to India. On the Sikh-Khalistani issue, the US Administration has no role in the formation of a congressional caucus, but that is not how it would be understood by the man on the street in India. India, as a victim of ISI-sponsored “Khalistani terrorism”, which ended with Operation *Bluestar* and the subsequent assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, still has deep memories of it all. North America also had its share of it with the Khalistani mid-air bombing of Air India Flight 182, *Emperor Kanishka*, after it had left a Canadian airport. The US had looked the other way, until 9/11 shook it up. The *Kanishka* bombing remains the world’s worst case of aerial terrorism involving a single aircraft.

Irritants of this kind need to be nipped in the bud if they are not to reflect on the developing relations between the two global democracies, namely, India and the US. Each of them has distinctive traits that are seldom understood in the other country. Indians, for instance, would expect the Obama Administration, or any other in its place, to persuade the members to dismantle the Congressional caucus, the same way US Presidents pressure Congress members to pass their budgets and welfare schemes. If it does not happen, Indians will not see the Congressional process as their problem; they will see it as a problem in bilateral relations.

Undoubtedly, India-US relations have improved substantially over the post-Cold War era; the signing of a defence cooperation agreement between the two countries in 2005 was an excellent indicator. Yet, with the details not being made available to the Indian people – Parliament included – the debate on the subject has been limited at best. With incumbent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) expected to face a tough parliamentary poll before May 2014, any alternative government at the helm could initiate a national debate on the subject. They may not, however, seek to review the pact, which Indians believe may after all be needed to keep an “expansionist” China in check.

More importantly, the US has managed its relations with India under governments led by both of the Indian national parties, the Congress and the BJP. India’s honeymoon with non-mainstream parties at the helm in the post-Cold War era was short and not necessarily happy. The US did not count then; nor could the US have counted on those governments. Given the current shape of the Indian economy, any post-poll government in New Delhi which did not include the Congress Party in particular – and the BJP also – would be tempted to look at the causes behind their loss of power.

In this context, “excessive” defence procurement, in the name of modernisation, for instance, could be come up for review by a post-poll government at New Delhi. In a boom time for the economy, it has remained a “sacred cow” and not even the anti-American Indian Left could meddle with it. Not even when home economies began feeling the pinch; when jobs were lost or not available; prices shot up; and subsidies were cut in the name of belt-tightening or economic prudence. These circumstances have visibly benefited the “haves” against the “have-nots”. But defence modernisation and procurement remained untouched.

It is true that India’s defence modernisation programme has included its one-time Russian ally and also the rest of the West, not just the US. Yet, when political questions begin to be asked, the US and not others will be in the firing-line. That may not damage bilateral relations, but it could dampen enthusiasm in New Delhi for moving on the charted course. America is yet to gain the trust and respect of ordinary Indians in the way that the Soviet Union formerly enjoyed; that gap has not yet been filled. Nor has enthusiasm for the US been rising in urban households, despite the jobs that their children have in the “wonderland” of the US. It has been static at best, though at least not waning. The job losses in the US tell different stories to individual Indians about what the US is – and what it is not.

Over the past two decades, on at least two major occasions, New Delhi did not – or rather, could not – deliver what Washington hoped was in the bag at one time. India's refusal to commit its armed forces for post-war peace-keeping in Iraq and also the parliamentary ruckus over the civilian nuclear deal, were pointers to the dynamics of Indian politics, which, in turn, need to be fully understood and absorbed. On both occasions, even the BJP, as the Government party on the Iraq issue and the main Opposition over the nuclear deal, could not take a position sympathetic to the US. The traditional Left risked withdrawing support to the Manmohan Singh Government at the Centre over the nuclear deal; it has not returned to the UPA fold since.

More recently, there have been differences over Iran, where the strategic perceptions of the US, also flow from past hurts. Those perceptions do not fully answer Indian demand for oil, which it needs to remain a booming economy and attract American investment. New Delhi also has its own strategic perceptions about Iran, highlighted by the recent trilateral decision between India, Afghanistan and Iran on building a port in Iran.

A section of the strategic community in India has also not forgotten the US spurning the unilateral Indian offer of military help to tackle Taliban-controlled, al-Qaida-infested Afghanistan after 9/11. The US preferred Pakistan instead. In the weeks and months after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Indian Government and the Indian population should not have cause to point fingers at the US for that past “folly”.

The extensive corruption in high places in government, highlighted by social media, to which average Indians are as wedded as the average American (although in their own ways), has also raised basic questions about the morality of it all. Better (or worse) still, increasingly questions are being asked by Indians, both through the social media and otherwise, about the real benefits accruing from the economic reforms, which they identify with the American model of market capitalism. This could influence their perceptions of India-US relations over the short- and medium-terms.

In turn, all this could create a mood and mind-set among Indians in which they have reservations about the US; a situation in which small things get blown out of all proportion, just as big things got crowded out when the going was good. The pressure on the government, flowing from changed public perceptions and the consequent mood, should not be under-estimated either. After all, the Indian decisions on sending troops to Iraq and the civilian nuclear deal were conditioned by public perceptions, reflected through the “democratic voice” of the nation's ever-expanding media, which has thoroughly embraced the competitive world of market capitalism.

The “String of Pearls” and Beyond

In the larger South Asian context, the increasing American presence, even if not dominance, has not gone entirely unnoticed. The rumoured Maldivian deal is only the latest example. It has come into some focus in India for an entirely different reason. It relates to the events of 2012 in the Indian Ocean island-nation, including the power transfer of 7 February, and the subsequent cancellation of the Male airport construction-cum-concession contract, held by

the Indian infrastructure major, GMR Group. Both issues got more than the usual share of media coverage in India.

Yet, it is in other South Asian capitals that the American presence in the region is beginning to be noticed. This may have commenced (justifiably so) with the American military presence in Afghanistan post-9/11. Greater political and moral justification is readily acknowledged this time, compared even to the American engagement over Afghanistan and the consequent aid to Pakistan in the Cold War era, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Long before the “Arab Spring”, the US supported elections in Bangladesh in 2008, conducted under the control of the military; which, however, readily stepped aside in favour of the elected civilian leadership. In Burma (Myanmar), freedom for jailed pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi led the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and later President Barack Obama, to come calling in quick succession. In Sri Lanka, the government’s supporters see in the American emphasis on accountability issues at the UNHCR in Geneva, clear signs of attempts at effecting regime change, starting from where the Arab Spring left off.

Even where a US hand is not seen, governments and analysts in the region have begun attributing US-induced motives to the “good Samaritan” role being played by other Western powers. In the present context, some South Asian analysts see in the growing US presence in what has been India’s traditional region of influence, New Delhi accepting the American intent and interests as a *fait accompli*.

The perception is that the String of Pearls theory has been used (if not invented), to pin down New Delhi to a set American geo-strategic agenda by painting an emerging China as a continuing threat to India, just as it was in the Sixties. The argument suggests that wherever in the neighbourhood New Delhi has “neutralised” Chinese influence and presence, even if only to a limited extent, the US has sought to quietly fill the emerging vacuum. The Maldives, according to this argument, is only the latest example; Sri Lanka may be next in the line.

During the Cold War years, owing to regional compulsions impacting on India’s geo-strategic considerations, the Soviet Union became an inevitable global partner. The reverse was also true. Today, in the post-Cold War era, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of China have led the rest of the world to overlook a re-emergent Russia, which is waiting in the wings to claim its due place and space in the global arena. With the Soviet-era nuclear stockpile, space technology and a large and substantially intact standing army, plus energy reserves to boot, it is not altogether unlikely that a silent Russia may have allowed the US to open a new front against itself in China. It could be that both China and Russia may be working – either in tandem or independently of each other – against the US, which they are unable to choose as a friend or foe over the medium and the long-term. The reverse is also true. South Asia, starting with India, will have to be awake to the possibilities.

Better or worse still, come 2016 or even earlier, the US and the UK will have to decide on the former continuing to have a military base in Diego Garcia. There used to be public protests

and court cases, including one pending before the Human Rights Commission of the EU, challenging the forced eviction of the local population under the 50-year old agreement. With Hambantota in Sri Lanka, China was believed to be wanting to at least keep an eye on Diego Garcia from a distance and also monitor the crucial Indian Ocean sea lanes lying in between. Any end of the Diego Garcia base for the US may lead to a new situation, for which India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and even Mauritius and the Seychelles, may not be prepared.

The perception is thus that India should draw a line for the US in South Asia, just as it wishes to do with Beijing, and tell the US point blank what it thought of the American “moves and methods” in the region. In the absence of such a discussion with China, for example, India has had to keep second-guessing Chinese intentions in South Asia and take appropriate defensive and protective measures, in political, economic and geo-strategic terms. As a partner with the US, New Delhi has access to information and communication with Washington at all levels. Or that is the expectation. Consequently, India should use those connections to achieve the best results for the South Asian region as a whole. Or so the argument goes.

Indications are, that in the strategically important Indian Ocean neighbourhood, countries such as Sri Lanka and Maldives seem to be adopting a three-track approach, unconsciously or otherwise, to global developments and regional realities. Thus, for development aid and the like, they go from wherever they are made available. Despite India having self-proclaimed friends within these countries, they may have developed a model of wanting India to stay away from their domestic politics, regardless of the relevance and compulsions. Independent of both, however, at least these two countries seem to have concluded, jointly or severally, that they cannot face up to external threats of any kind whatsoever, and needed to develop a regional mechanism with India, the largest and strongest nation with the capability for quick-time emergency response for all South Asian neighbours. As countries, they would want India to do it for them, and would not condescend to India telling them whom to approach. If they have to choose from extra-territorial powers, they would do it themselves and on their own terms. In the case of India, whether China or the US or some other country is the extra-regional power extending the “aid weapon” in its neighbourhood, it might not be long before it would be asked to pay up on the other’s terms – and in ways that are strategically disadvantageous or adversarial to India. South Asia, with or without Pakistan, will have to address the issue, and India has to take the lead.

The downside is that if India decides it does not want to keep the US out of South Asia (which anyway it cannot, given the existing American presence and its extent), it would be seen as acquiescing to the same, nonetheless. In the emerging geo-strategic climate, a similar approach by China could not be far behind. This could mean that South Asia may again become a “battleground” of global giants, just as in the Cold War, with no one asking the region’s states what is good for them or what should not be done in their region. For India, it would mean complete sidelining of the nation in the region after a time. Unlike during the Cold War era, this time round, India’s western allies have been telling Indians and the rest of the world that India has arrived, not only economically but also in geo-strategic terms. The past pandering to the Indian pride/ego would be exposed. India and Indians may not like it either.

If India cannot take stand on extra-territorial presence of extra-regional powers in South Asia, both politically and militarily, it cannot expect other regional states to do so, either. It then would not be appropriate for India to tell its neighbours that what is good for India is good for them. Those countries would then use their freedom to choose their friends from among the various extra-regional actors and India could not complain. In those circumstances, New Delhi, in the region's eyes, would have abdicated that responsibility and surrendered any rights and preferences with it. To maintain a legitimate supremacy in South Asia, India should display leadership qualities, not only within the region as some Western pundits (and possibly governments) have been telling it. It should not content itself with telling regional states what they should and should not do. Leaving Pakistan aside, the rest of South Asia has to be convinced that India is prepared to defend the region in general, and individual countries in particular, against external pressures and "aggressions" of all kinds. Some of their expectations and justification may not cut ice with and in India. They still see that part of it as India's problems, not theirs – not certainly that of the region.

The post-Cold War focus remains there today, is bringing South Asia and the Indian Ocean sea-lanes into the global discourse and geo-strategic perceptions. India's responsibility to itself and the region has therefore increased, not decreased. It cannot be seen as ambivalent, or to not treat threats to the region as threats to itself, especially when it want its own neighbours to apply that policy in reverse.

On the other side of the spectrum, there has also been a noticeable thawing of relations between India and China. While no great changes have emerged so far, in the bilateral relations between the two countries, which share a disputed border 4,500 kilometres in length; nevertheless, the way the two countries handled the May 2013 border incident has not gone unnoticed. There is also appreciation for the fact that the successive leaderships of the two countries in the post-Cold War era have been continuously talking to each other and discussing normalisation of their bilateral relations.

The "Chinese model" of democratisation (like the Chinese model of economic reforms), in which the party-run, unitary State changes its leadership every ten years, is seen as the adaptation of universally acknowledged principles to suit local conditions and the realities on the ground, without "importing everything Western". That would be a poor fit, if not ill-suited as well. In contrast, the dynamism of India's democratic process gains a high score. Being regional and comprehensible, there is a preference for its adaptation to suit a variety of conditions, such as in Bangladesh and Nepal, or in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Furthermore, there is some acceptance of India's leading role in the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), despite it being a body of equals, and also of its prime role in South Asia's contributions to such international fora as the UN and the Commonwealth. The historic and cultural linkages of individual countries in South Asia to the Indian pivot also cannot be overlooked. Their inability to defend themselves against extra-territorial threats also makes India the fulcrum of their geo-strategic policy-making.

Realisations

There is thus an increasing realisation that a South Asian state courting an “outsider” to irritate, or even neutralise, India, would make things worse for itself, not better. To many of them, Pakistan’s experience serves as a reminder that they cannot wish away India, whatever friends and allies they make outside. Pakistan, aided – if not actually egged on – by the US and China, from either side of the Cold War spectrum, sacrificed its sense of internal security at the altar of regional and global expediency, if only for a period, in an unwanted and unequal war with India. Neither of the great powers can help Pakistan stop its current downslide, the only positive aspect of which is greater democratisation, other than the realisation that it had got it all wrong, and is now paying for it in the form of terrorism on the home front that it was exporting to India – and is doing so even now.

There is also a realisation, however, that in recent years, India has begun viewing the situation in the region as a part of its broader concerns on the political, economic and geo-strategic fronts. Even as the rest of the world increasingly focusses on the Indian Ocean region, particularly the area abutting South Asia, the time-lapse required for India to re-invent its place and space has left gaps, which need to be filled. India needs to help itself but also allow others in the region to help it. What is not often mentioned, however, is that other regional states also need to help themselves and allow India, in turn, to help them.

About the Author: The writer is Director of the Chennai Chapter of the Observer Research Foundation, the multi-disciplinary Indian public-policy think-tank, headquartered in New Delhi.

Author’s Note: This paper was written before the India-US Strategic Dialogue at New Delhi in June 2013, and also ahead of the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka maritime security consultations aimed at the conclusion of a trilateral agreement at Colombo, later that month.

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