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INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIA'S GLOBAL INTERESTS

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The United States in South Asia: The India Factor

Lindsay Hughes
Research Analyst
Indian Ocean Research Programme

Key Points

- The India-United States bilateral relationship appears to have come full circle.
- It has moved from one of trust to mutual suspicion and back, albeit still not fully, towards one of mutual trust.
- That is due to changing geopolitical environments and increasingly shared perceptions of mutual need.
- Were the two countries to take the larger step of forming an alliance, they could prove to be a very powerful force internationally.

Summary

It was reported recently that a team of US specialists – lawyers, policy wonks and technical experts – had been despatched by the Pentagon to New Delhi to meet their Indian counterparts to discuss and negotiate the text of one of the three foundational agreements that Washington wishes India to enter into with it. The discussions are a prelude to the 2+2 Dialogue between the Indian Minister of External Affairs and the Minister of Defence and their US counterparts in Washington next month. The US team was in New Delhi to address Indian concerns about the implications of entering into the agreement.

The agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), is required to be signed by purchasers of certain US military platforms according to US law if

the sales of those platforms are to be undertaken. In its essence, COMCASA provides the necessary framework that enables the US to sell security-focused communications equipment that enables communications interoperability between Indian forces and those of the US and, potentially, other US allies that use the same or similar secure data links.

The entire affair is yet another sign of the growing overall relationship between the US and India, a relationship that both desire for their individual reasons. It is interesting that the relationship has flourished and is growing as quickly as it is, given that it was not always as cordial. It is equally interesting that both countries will need to overcome several challenges if it is to flourish further.

Analysis

India has already entered into two of the so-called "foundational" agreements with the US. In 2002, it signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and followed that with the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that gives the militaries of both countries access to each other's facilities for supplies and repairs in 2016. It must be noted that, according to India's understanding, the LEMOA does not automatically or obligatorily provide logistical or basing support for either side. According to Washington, signing the COMCASA would enable India to fully use the high-end secured communications equipment that is integral to some of the military platforms, such as the *Sea Guardian* drones, that New Delhi wishes to purchase from it. The Pentagon is said to have informed New Delhi that there is no way India could use the cutting-edge drones absent the secure data link that is, in turn, predicated upon signing the COMCASA. Washington further contends that COMCASA would make available to India's defence forces the full potential of its US-sourced military platforms, thus obviating their reliance on less-secure commercially-available communications systems that are currently used on platforms such as the C-130 and P-8I aircraft.

India, for its part, is wary of having its communications systems potentially being intruded upon by the US or, for that matter, having to cope with a communications system that may not be compatible with its existing Russian platforms.

The entire situation could be seen a metaphor for the US-India relationship: a recognition of the desirability of the relationship tempered by a massive dose of caution that the other side cannot as yet be fully trusted to adhere to the spirit and letter of any signed agreement. Both sides have their historical reasons for exercising such caution, given that the bilateral relationship has had its fair share of ups and downs. Those need to be examined in order to better understand the current relationship.

The leaders of independent India, from the time of its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, endeavoured to build upon the support provided to them in their fight for independence from Great Britain. They sought to create a strategic relationship with the US, possibly because of their perceptions of it being a democracy but more likely because it had by then become the premier military and economic global power, in order to develop their own

economy, military capacity and to gain diplomatic support. That wish was premature, however, since Washington still deferred to London in matters relating to the Sub-continent. India-US relations, nevertheless, remained cordial, if not warm, up to 1962, with Washington becoming India's largest aid donor and the former's perception of India as an important sub-region in its (Washington's) bid to contain the spread of communism in Asia. The situation obtained despite India's reluctance to become a formal ally of the US due to its desire to remain neutral and non-aligned in the Cold War which, by then, was at its height.

In 1962, that paradigm changed completely. As a previous FDI paper has noted:

> In that year, China, probably provoked by the misguided "Forward Policy" of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, invaded India, overrunning Indian defences in its north-east. Nehru turned in desperation to the United States to supply it with aircraft and other materiel. Describing the situation as desperate, he requested the despatch of a minimum of twelve squadrons of supersonic all-weather fighter aircraft and radar equipment to be used against the Chinese forces. Probably seeking to draw the US into the conflict, he informed President John F. Kennedy that American personnel would be required to operate the aircraft and radar installations until Indian personnel had been trained in their use. If necessary, he suggested, the US would need to make available aircraft flown by American personnel to assist the Indian Air Force in battles within Indian airspace. He also requested two squadrons of bombers to strike at Chinese installations and air bases. [Mr Nehru wrote two letters to President Kennedy. These may be viewed here.]
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> Nehru probably felt justified in asking for this aid, which was worth around five hundred million US dollars spread over five years – which the USA was willing to provide – because it had previously provided Pakistan with military aid worth over eight hundred million US dollars. Kennedy agreed to the request but the Departments of State and Defence prevailed upon him not to upset Pakistan. The aid package consequently offered amounted to half of that requested but, more importantly, came with the condition that India make territorial concessions to Pakistan on Kashmir.
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> Nehru immediately backed away from his request for an American shield. As he later argued, apart from the fact that the Chinese could have attacked and inflicted much damage on Indian cities and infrastructure before any American support materialised, it made no sense to become militarily dependent upon another country to defend itself.
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> Washington was also engaged in a crisis of its own: the Cuban missile crisis was at its height and President Kennedy was engaged in discussions with the country's defence officials and in negotiations (and threats) with Russian representatives and government officials. Recognising the USSR as a state that was able to challenge the US, Nehru turned to Moscow instead.

It must be noted at this stage that a contrary description of events is provided by some analysts. They believe that Kennedy was prepared to go to war against China in order to assist India but China unilaterally withdrew its forces before that could happen. According to those analysts, moreover, Kennedy prevailed upon Pakistan not to take advantage of India's predicament. One authoritative source has it that President Kennedy also wrote to Indian Prime Minister Nehru asking 'what [America] can do to translate our support into terms that are practically most useful to you as soon as possible.' Be that as it may, in the aftermath of its defeat at the hands of China, India turned increasingly to the Soviet Union, initially as a supplier of weapons systems, then for economic support and, finally, as a strategic ally, even as it proclaimed its policy of non-alignment to the world. The implicit rejection of the US gesture of assistance during the war with China created suspicion about India's motives in Washington. That, too, is not surprising. By the early 1960s, the US was becoming increasingly involved in Vietnam in its ongoing bid to halt the spread of communism in East Asia. At the same time, India, influenced to a very large extent by the Soviet economic model – even going so far as to copy the Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans model – turned increasingly inwards in its quest to become economically self-reliant. The period between 1965 and 1971 was marked by an increasingly cooler relationship between the two countries.

The relationship reached its nadir in 1971. In that year, India and Pakistan, which had fought two wars between 1947 and that year, went to war once again. India again defeated Pakistan, which led to the creation of Bangladesh and removed the threat of a Pakistani attack on two fronts. The magnitude of the defeat was sufficient to encourage Indian Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw to suggest to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that India ought to invade West Pakistan as well and put an end to the Pakistani threat once and for all. Washington, however, learned of that and stationed a nuclear aircraft carrier, the USS *Enterprise*, in the Bay of Bengal to indicate to New Delhi that it could go so far but no further. China also indicated that it could come to the assistance of West Pakistan should India invade that wing of the country.

India learned from that lesson. Here were two nuclear powers (China had tested a nuclear device in 1964 at Lop Nor and a thermonuclear device in 1967), threatening India and New Delhi was unable to do anything about it. Even though China had informed Pakistan as early as April 1971 that it would not enter militarily into an Indo-Pakistani conflict over East Pakistan, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was aware that that stance could change. Furthermore, China by that time had built up a substantial nuclear armoury. To remove the threat of a Chinese nuclear attack, Mrs Gandhi approached Washington to extend a nuclear umbrella in the event that China attacked India with nuclear arms in support of Pakistan. The US President, Richard Nixon, and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, however, were more interested in developing their diplomatic relations with China as a means of countering their perceived threat from the Soviet Union. The stage was set; India had to carry out its own nuclear tests.

India tested its first nuclear device in 1974. New Delhi was at pains to emphasise that it was a "peaceful nuclear test" designed to enhance India's nuclear energy capability, going to the extent of naming the project "Smiling Buddha". International reaction to the test, interestingly, was extremely muted. It then conducted a second nuclear test in 1998. That

test was, in fact, a series of three explosions that, according to Indian authorities, included a 43-kiloton thermonuclear device. There remains, however, an elevated degree of scepticism about the success of that device. As at least one seismic analysis of the test has demonstrated, the cumulative yield of the three tests was around 12 kilotons, which is too small by far to suggest a thermonuclear explosion. A senior scientist who worked as a project leader on the tests went a step further, suggesting that the thermonuclear explosion had failed altogether. This reinforced India's determination not to sign the US-led Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty until it could develop thermonuclear weapons to further ensure its security.

The Clinton Administration consequently imposed sanctions on India despite the protestations of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee that India needed to conduct the tests given the circumstances of its geopolitical environment. By the time of the George W. Bush presidency, however, it was generally recognised by Washington that China's growth demanded more critical attention than it had received until then. That rationale led to India being perceived as a potential partner in any competition between Washington and Beijing. It made sense, therefore, to not only lift the sanctions but to encourage India's economic growth. That led to the sanctions being lifted and, after the unforeseen attacks on the World Trade Centre and the ensuing Global War on terror had got underway, President Bush signed a civilian nuclear agreement with India.

The bilateral relationship accelerated after that development, with India increasingly purchasing American military products and technology and growing closer to the United States. The relationship grew further under the Modi Government, leading to the debate as to whether or not to enter into the COMCASA and BECA.

India is of major importance to the United States for a variety of reasons: economic, military, geographically, politically and even symbolically. As the world's largest democracy, it makes sense for the US, itself arguably the world's most powerful democracy, to have India on board as an ally. The fact that India is the fastest-growing major economy and its potential market of around 1.3 billion people, together with its need for investment and technology to upgrade its infrastructure, only heightens Washington's need to cultivate India as an ally. Its economic strength and growth has led Washington to, among other reasons, begin to refer to the region as the "Indo-Pacific" rather than the "Asia-Pacific", a move opposed by China, which now sees itself clubbed together regionally with other Asian countries rather than marking one economic and geographic end of the region. India's geographical location and the fact that its landmass juts into the Indian Ocean, which sees major shipments of Chinese exports to the Middle East, Africa and Europe and energy imports from Africa and the Middle East, give it strategic advantages that could be exploited if required. India's relations with the Central Asian republics, especially Afghanistan, which see it as being non-aggressive, and its border with Pakistan, with which country the US has an ambivalent relationship, also make it a valuable ally. India, in short, matters to the United States.

India, similarly, needs to be allied with the United States. Over the latter half of the twentieth century and from of the beginning of the current one, the US has been at the forefront in preventing a potential hegemon, such as the Soviet Union, Russia or China, from

gaining complete power in Central and South Asia. That permits India to concentrate to a larger extent on developing its economy. Washington remains the stabilising force in Asia by virtue of its military might and diplomatic force. New Delhi sees Washington as the primary power that can prevent Beijing from becoming the regional hegemon. While India could stand up to Beijing in a military confrontation, doing so would cost it dearly in military and economic terms; the United States, by virtue of merely being a recognised Indian ally, could force Beijing to consider very closely any action it might wish to take that could jeopardise India's interests. That is equally the case for India in regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

As Washington does India, New Delhi recognises the potential economic advantages that the United States offers for its goods and services, including the export of its expertise in information technology. It could also have access to American military and civilian technology as well as have a powerful ally in international forums, such as the United Nations, where New Delhi seeks to have a greater role. India ought not to forget that it was the efforts of the US that saw it bypass the restraints of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and become a partner of the Missile Technology Control Regime, a partnership to which China aspires but has been unsuccessful so far. It is also the US that is working with India to make the latter a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which would give India further access to much-needed advanced civilian nuclear technology from countries such as Japan and the US itself.

The US-India relationship appears to have come full circle to the point where Washington is working towards enabling India's growth. It takes a great deal of courage to overcome decades of mistrust and suspicion but, if the two countries work towards increasing their co-operation, they could potentially move towards a full alliance. Should that occur, the world's most powerful democracy and its largest could well prove an unstoppable force. Signing COMCASA and the last foundational agreement, therefore, could be a major step towards that outcome.

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80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au