

Limitations for the Strategic Partnership—India from the Transatlantic Perspective

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Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework of discussion on India's emergence as an Asian power, the impact on US strategic interests in Asia, and the implications for the transatlantic U.S.-European strategic partnership. The paper introduces this framework in the context of the increasing importance of a strategic relationship with India for the United States, given the emerging geopolitical environment in Asia. The paper focuses discussion on the importance of India to the United States in the context of U.S. relations with other rising powers in Asia—in particular, Russia, China, and Iran.

Of the five current and/or emerging powers in Asia—i.e., Russia, China, Japan, Iran, and India—the United States has historically had, and to varying degrees continues to have, contentious relations with at least three of them, namely Russia, China, and Iran. The expanding scopes of influence of all three powers—and their geopolitical ambitions—in Asia potentially challenge U.S. strategic and security concerns, as well as U.S. primacy, in Asia. In this context, U.S. relations with the remaining two Asian powers—Japan and India—gain increasing significance, as both could serve as a counterweight to Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence in the region. While Japan has been and remains a staunch ally of the United States in Asia, India could be the pivot on which the future of U.S. strategic interests in Asia is balanced. With Russia reasserting its preeminence in Central Asia, Iran expanding its interests in Central, South, and Southwest Asia, and China extending its influence in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, India—which continues to be a relatively 'neutral' country with interests in all three regions—is the critical partner the United States needs to maintain the balance of power in the region.

India's Strategic Environment:

India has always been, and remains, the preeminent physical, political, economic, and strategic power in South Asia. India's legacy as both a historical and contemporary regional power has directed its foreign policy priority to establish "its rightful place in the emerging world order", a grand strategy that witnessed a significant upswing in the past decade or so and has been further boosted by the emergence of India as an economic powerhouse in Asia. India's strategic environment could be described in terms of concentric circles of influence. Within its immediate vicinity, India must contend with the challenges of China, Pakistan, and its smaller neighbors—Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Burma, and the Maldives. While the internal stability of the smaller states is a regional security concern for India, it is China and Pakistan that pose the major challenge. The Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia constitute the next circle of policy interest for India. With a burgeoning economy India has increasing energy interests in the Persian Gulf, and has been exploring alternative/additional sources of energy in Central Asia. India's relations with Southeast Asia are dominated by trade and security concerns, particularly with regard to India's potential to serve as a security guarantor in the Indian Ocean. Finally, the outermost circle of India's strategic environment includes interactions with more distant

governments, particularly the United States. However, while India has been actively fostering a closer strategic relationship with the United States, as signaled by high-level exchanges between the two countries in recent years as well as new bilateral agreements in progress—the most significant being the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation initiative—it also strives to retain its “ideal of strategic autonomy” through close relations with other powers including Russia, China, Japan, and the European Union. To advance its agenda at the global level, India believes that it “must be militarily credible, internally stable, economically strong, and diplomatically savvy.”¹

India’s Relations with Russia, Iran, and China:

A strategic U.S.-India relationship gains even further significance if we take into consideration that India has, or is developing, strategic ties with three of the countries it has had historically contentious relations with—and could, therefore, be in a position to positively facilitate U.S. détente with these states.

India-Russia Relations:

India’s strategic relationship with Russia dates back to the Cold War period. Pakistan’s rapprochement with the United States in the mid-1950s was the catalyst for India to establish close ties with the Soviet Union. Though India remained an active leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, India and the Soviet Union engaged in intense economic, political, and military cooperation, culminating in 1971 with the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. Despite an ebb in bilateral relations in the immediate post-Soviet aftermath, recent indicators point to a renewal of the historical tie, particularly by way of military cooperation, and energy cooperation may prove just as beneficial for both countries. India also looks to Russia as a potential supporter for its permanent membership bid at the UN Security Council. Russia, in turn, views its own strategic interests as consistent with a stronger India, particularly in the context of balancing other growing powers in Asia such as China.²

India-Iran Relations:

India’s relations with Iran have traditionally been positive, and in 2003 the two countries launched a “strategic partnership” with the signing of the “New Delhi Declaration” and seven other substantive agreements. Iran continues to be a major energy source (both oil and gas) for India. The two countries have also discussed a proposed gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan, with possible extension from Pakistan to China—construction on the pipeline is tentatively scheduled to begin in 2007, with completion expected in 2010. Despite U.S. concerns over the growing India-Iran relationship—much of which have factored into the present debate over the proposed U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation initiative—it is unlikely that India will abandon its positive ties with Iran, given its energy interests in the country, mutual interests in ensuring a stable Afghanistan (and thereby India’s access corridor to Central Asia), and domestic political pressures that would make any Indian government sensitive to being perceived as a U.S. proxy in the region.³

¹ John H. Gill, “India and Pakistan: A Shift in the Military Calculus?” in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills (eds), *Strategic Asia 2005-2006*, Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2005

² “Prospects for India-Russia Security Relations,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 7, 2003, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=591>

³ K. Alan Kronstadt and Kenneth Katzman, “India-Iran Relations and U.S. Interests,” *CRS Report for Congress*, August 2, 2006, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/70294.pdf>

India-China Relations:

China's multiplicities of roles vis-à-vis India, as an "economic competitor, potential military threat, increasingly important trading partner, occasional diplomatic collaborator, and ally and military supplier of rival Pakistan" as well as its increasing influence in neighboring Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka, compel India to adopt a mixed bag of competition and cooperation in its strategic dealings with China. Although relations between India and China are currently better than ever the two countries remain wary of each other's rising power projection in Asia. While both countries have experienced a significant boost in their bilateral economic investments, with China positioned to emerge as India's largest trading partner by the end of this decade, both China and India are also developing security assets to counter each other. India thus appears to have adopted a dual strategy toward China, one that involves cooperation with China on the one hand to develop closer economic ties, and on the other hand involves developing closer security ties with the United States as a balance against growing Chinese power in the region.⁴

India's Relations with the United States:

India's relations with the United States have witnessed a sea change in recent years. India has been referred to as a "natural partner" by President G.W. Bush, and the current U.S. Administration is keen on assisting India's rise as an Asian power. President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a joint Statement in July 2005, "resolving to establish a "global partnership" between their two countries through increased cooperation on numerous economic, security, and global issues. In this Joint Statement, the Bush Administration dubbed India "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology" and vowed to achieve "full civilian nuclear energy cooperation" with India."⁵ The United States and India also signed a ten-year defense framework agreement in 2005 that calls for expanded bilateral security cooperation.

Timeline of U.S.-India Relations (post-Soviet Union)⁶:

1998: India launches successful nuclear tests in May 1998; then-Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott launches series of meeting with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in effort to bring New Delhi more in line with U.S. arms control and nonproliferation goals.

Though immediate purpose went unfulfilled, Talbott-Singh talks considered most extensive U.S.-India engagement up to that time and likely enabled circumstances for U.S. to play key role in defusing 1999 Kargil crisis, as well as laying groundwork for landmark U.S. presidential visit in 2000.

⁴ John H. Gill, "India and Pakistan: A Shift in the Military Calculus?" in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills (eds), *Strategic Asia 2005-2006*, Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2005; Devesh Kapur and Kavita Iyengar, "The Limits of Integration in Improving South Asian Security," in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills (eds), *Strategic Asia 2006-2007*, Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2006

⁵ K. Alan Kronstadt, "India-U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, updated November 9, 2006, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33529.pdf>

⁶ K. Alan Kronstadt, "India-U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, updated November 9, 2006, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33529.pdf>

- 2000: Visit by President Bill Clinton in March 2000 seen as major U.S. initiative to improve relations with India; resulted in Joint Statement in which two countries pledged to “deepen the India-American partnership in tangible ways.” U.S.-India Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism established.
- Subsequent visit by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee later that year resulted in second Joint Statement with President Clinton agreeing to cooperate on arms control, terrorism, and HIV/AIDS.
- 2001: In wake of 9/11 attacks India took immediate and unprecedented step of offering United States full cooperation and the use of India’s bases for counterterrorism operations.
- Engagement accelerated after a November 2001 meeting between President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee, when two leaders agreed to expand cooperation on regional security, space and scientific collaboration, civilian nuclear safety, and broadened economic ties.
- In late 2001, U.S.-India Defense Policy Group met in New Delhi for first time since India’s 1998 nuclear tests and outlined defense partnership based on regular and high-level policy dialogue.
- 2005: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid landmark visit to Washington in July 2005, resulting in joint U.S.-India statement.
- 2006: President Bush spent three days in India and discussed further strengthening a bilateral “global partnership.”
- Today, the Bush Administration vows to “help India become a major world power in the 21st century,” and U.S.-India relations are conducted under a rubric of three major “dialogue” areas: strategic (including global issues and defense), economic (including trade, finance, commerce, and environment), and energy.
- The 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States* claims that “India now is poised to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States in a way befitting a major power.”

Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP):

A joint statement issued by President Bush and Prime Minister Vajpayee in January 2004, the NSSP declared that the U.S.-India “strategic partnership included expanding cooperation in the “trinity” areas of U.S. exports to India of dual use high-technology goods (those with military applications); increased civilian nuclear and civilian space cooperation, as well as expanding dialogue on missile defense. The “trinity” issues were pushed by the Indian side, as necessary to provide tangible evidence of a changed U.S.-India relationship. The State Department announced a successful completion of the NSSP initiative in July 2005. The series of negotiations resulted in expanded bilateral commercial satellite cooperation, removal/revision of some U.S. export license requirements for certain dual-use and civil nuclear items. The NSSP was seen as evidence of a major and positive shift in the U.S. strategic orientation toward India, a shift

emphasized by the subsequent support by the Bush Administration for full civil nuclear cooperation with India.⁷

Challenges and Opportunities for the United States:

The United States perceives India as a viable, democratic, and friendly partner in the region to help promote U.S. democratization and economic liberalization efforts; maintain the strategic balance in Asia, particularly vis-à-vis China; contain the reach, and thereby threat-potential, of Iran. Ideally, the United States would like to see India's support for U.S. containment policies toward Iran—particularly on the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions—and, perhaps, as a bulwark against further Chinese encroachment on U.S. strategic interests in the region.

Challenges:

- U.S. policy and the drive for a strategic partnership with India will have to take into account India's traditional inclinations for strategic autonomy and a multi-polar world.⁸
- India is unlikely to pursue or support any externally-driven policy that is counter to its domestic interests and/or its immediate foreign policy priorities. In this context, the limitations of the U.S.-India strategic partnership are likely to be a mixed bag of cooperation.
- India will likely continue to nurture relations with Iran, Russia, and China, particularly in the context of securing energy resources and economic trade and investment opportunities in its "near abroad."
- While a U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement may not necessarily divert India's energy interests in Iran, it may pose the challenge of exacerbating nuclear proliferation, and deem the NPT a complete failure.

Opportunities:

- India's credibility and role as a "neutral" player in Asia may serve U.S. interests, however indirectly. Along with Pakistan and Iran, India also now has observer status with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and may potentially play a critical balancing role in this multilateral organization that many see developing as an "anti-U.S./West" counterpoint to other international bodies.
- India's involvement with ASEAN and increasing economic relations with Southeast Asia, as well as its potential as a security guarantor in the Indian Ocean, could play a critical balance against increasing Chinese influence in the region. India remains suspicious of China's 'great power' ambitions and is keen on modernizing its military capabilities to keep pace with China—an opportunity for greater U.S.-India military cooperation that could help solidify the strategic partnership.
- Though not a signatory to the NPT, India has traditionally exercised mature restraint in its nuclear activities, with successive Indian governments adopting a "no first use" policy. With the NPT considered ineffectual even prior to discussion of an agreement with India, the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement—if approved by Congress—could serve as a potential model for future such bilateral agreements between 'responsible' states.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John H. Gill, "India: Regional Concerns, Global Ambitions," in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg with Michael Wills, *Strategic Asia 2003-2004*, Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2003