

Guiding Principles of Indo-US Strategic Partnership

Strategic Autonomy or Strategic Interest?

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The Indo-US strategic partnership has been a long project that is soon going to be a quarter of a century old. While the Kicklighter Proposal of 1991 sowed the seeds of this partnership, their germination began with the March 2000 visit to India by the US President Bill Clinton. From 1991 till Clinton's visit, there were good beginnings and unexpected pitfalls that prevented the growth of the strategic partnership. The most serious pitfall was, of course, India's decision to go nuclear in 1998, and the Clinton Administration's resolve to impose sanctions on India.

However, the root of the strategic partnership between the two countries can be traced back to the Vision Statement signed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the US President Bill Clinton. Since then, the two countries have travelled a long road step-by-step, overcoming hurdles and building up a closer defence and security relationship that deeply contrasts with the mistrust and strategic divergences witnessed during the four decades of the Cold War. The Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbot negotiations after the Indian nuclear tests,¹ the defence framework agreement inked by Defence

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Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld,² and the 123 Agreement signed by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice were important milestones in the Indo-US defence cooperation.³

Today, the Indo-US strategic partnership encompasses consistent military exercises, high-level exchanges of military top brass, considerable arms trade, regular dialogues between Foreign and Defence ministries, and cooperation in defence research and development. India no longer faces technology denial regimes led by the US. India's de facto nuclear weapon arsenals have come to be accepted by successive administrations in the US as a *fait accompli* and, more significantly, the heads of government of the two countries meet more frequently than ever before. India and the US have convergent views on Indo-Pacific strategic issues, and both desire an open, free, and prosperous Indo-Pacific where freedom of navigation is not infringed by any country.

GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

However, the global geopolitics has undergone serious transformations, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. The political and economic impact of the pandemic, leading to the loss of supply chains and value chain disruptions, were felt around the globe. International trade, investment, and movement of people for tourism or employment suffered a great deal. The economic woes subsequently deepened with a sort of US–China economic Cold War led by US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁴ Close on the heels of the pandemic, Russia invaded Ukraine in retaliation against the possibility of the expansion of NATO to include Ukraine that borders Russian territory. Policymakers in the US were well aware that Russia would not tolerate any idea to make Ukraine a member of NATO. Russia had repeatedly cautioned the Western powers against taking any step to do so.

Significantly, the current Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William J. Burns, who also earlier served as US Ambassador to Russia, in a memo written to the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in 2008, had also pointed out that

Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players . . . I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.⁵

The US and its NATO allies strongly responded to the Russo-Ukraine War, by fully backing Ukraine by sending military assistance and intelligence support. The war that began in February of 2022 continues till date, with no end in sight. It has literally turned into a war between the US and Russia, mainly America's proxy war against Russia. All sorts of weapons have been transferred to Ukraine, the US and its allies give political and diplomatic support to Ukraine, and condemn Russia in every possible international forum; simultaneously, harsh sanctions have been imposed on Russia.⁶

Russia, on the other hand, has gone closer to China, and has been able to make common cause with China in view of the continuation of the economic cold war unleashed by President Donald Trump, and followed by his successor Joe Biden.⁷ The US-China relationship under the Biden Administration did not remain confined to trade and tariffs war, and a very serious cold confrontation has unfolded between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸ As China aspires to create an Indo-Pacific order of its own, the US has shown determination to preserve, strengthen and protect the order it helped create in this region. China's Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese domination of trade with American allies, Beijing's claim of sovereignty over disputed islands in South China Sea, the construction of military facilities in some islands, and grey zone naval activities have caused concerns in the US. More worrisome is dangerous Chinese air and naval manoeuvres to challenge the US naval and aircrafts in and over the South China Sea, which can cause clashes by accident, and turn into wider conflicts.

The most serious flashpoint of potential danger of US-China conflict is, however, the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty. China has traditionally been vocal in expressing its anger over Washington's supply of sophisticated weapons to Taiwan. But the Biden Administration's indirect support or inaction over the visit to Taiwan by the speaker of the US House of Representatives on invitation from pro-independence political leader, Tsai Ing-wen, enraged Beijing beyond expectation.⁹ The fierce military drill that China conducted, and how it exhibited its military prowess signalled the width and depth of consequences that may follow US-China conflict over Taiwan. President Biden's repeated assertion that the US would come to rescue of Taiwan in case it faces military takeover by China, and China's recurring declaration that it reserves the right to annex Taiwan by force, if required, symbolise cold confrontation between the aspiring superpower and the existing superpower. This situation has already caused confusion, concerns and dilemma in the Indo-Pacific where the countries find it

difficult to take sides in any US–China confrontation, and yet get affected by the frequent US–China political tensions.

Thus, the current Cold War between the US and Russia, and the undercurrent of Sino-US confrontation have already created a geopolitical upheaval that demands the recalibration of India's foreign policy and strategic orientations. China is a rival, competitor and adversary in certain dimensions. Russia is a time-tested strategic partner. How should India delimit its strategic partnership with the US in such a way that it helps India to serve its strategic interests? The factors that complicate India's calculation are US–Russia adversarial ties reminiscent of the US–USSR Cold War, Sino-Russian strategic closeness against the US, and the US–China fierce competition that threaten to escalate into a deadly cold war.

INDIA'S RESPONSES

During the early years after India's independence, the US was trying to establish a liberal world order to promote free trade, commercial capitalism and democracy. The former Soviet Union made efforts to set up an international socialist order. They were, nonetheless, not simple and innocent ideological efforts on the part of Washington and Moscow. Rather, the hidden agenda was to establish international orders that would serve their respective interests, and make them world leaders. The result was intense cold war rivalry that shaped international relations. Both the powers created blocs and alliances, and desired other countries to join them against their adversary.

India devised a non-aligned strategy to navigate through the cold war superpower rivalry. India tried to befriend both the power blocs, but came under suspicion of the superpowers. It was not always possible to take a neutral stand on all issues where Washington and Moscow took opposite stands. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, India had to choose closer ties with the Soviet Union due to altered geopolitics in which the US and China came together against the former Soviet Union. The East Pakistan crisis, in a way, persuaded India to forge closer security ties with Moscow to counter Washington's and Beijing's overt support to the Yahya regime in Pakistan.

Coincidentally, today's geopolitical changes resemble the Cold War equations in the sense that Russia and China have come together against the US that is in a cold war type competition with Russia and China at the same time. But Russia is not like the former communist Soviet Union, and communist China is not like what it was during the Cold War. China has huge trade and investment ties with the US, and is now in a position to

compete with the US for world leadership. Russia is no match to the US in economic terms, but has the military capability that can threaten the physical existence of the US. The Russian influence over Syria, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam is America's envy. The US could do little to counter Russia's intervention in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and has not been able to turn the tables in the battlefields of Ukraine, despite billions of dollars of expenditure, arms transfers and the full backing of powerful NATO members.

What India has done is actually borrow a strategy from its own non-aligned strategy, and sought to maintain strategic partnerships with both the US and Russia. India buys Russian oil, which is in its economic interests, but the US considers it bolstering Russian capacity to sustain the war in Ukraine. The US tries to reduce India's arms trade with Russia and offers it high-end military equipment and technology, but the terms and conditions are not always attractive. Russia does sell military equipment to India, but it is largely to earn foreign exchange than to cement strategic ties with India. India neither supports nor opposes US sanctions against Russia. Likewise, India does not endorse Russian military action against Ukraine to the extent China does, but nor does India condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰

India has been walking a tightrope. Russia appears happy that India has not condemned its military action in Ukraine and also keeps buying Russian energy. The US is weary about Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific, and considers India a partner in facing the Chinese challenge. The formation of the Quadrilateral Security Grouping or QUAD, and India's membership in it is not a military grouping, but Beijing sees in it an effort to contain China.¹¹ None of the QUAD partners have a policy to contain China, and all of them frequently air this view. But, at the perceptual level, it is believed widely that QUAD serves as one among the many mechanisms that send signals to China to restrain itself, and not take steps that would challenge national sovereignty of other countries in the region. Many analysts are of the view that the Biden Administration tolerates India's relationship with Russia in view of the need to keep India on board against Chinese muscle flexing and territorial expansionism.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

How strong will India's strategic partnership with the US be, if the latter tolerates India's ties with Russia due to the China factor? If Russia were to finally emerge victorious from the Ukraine War, how will it affect India's

ties with the US? If Russia achieves a pyrrhic victory, how will Washington treat its strategic partnership with India? Can India stay up to Washington's expectations if US–China relations further deteriorate, and the US decides to take strong steps against China, making conflict inevitable?

In other words, will the US and India be on the same side if there is China's military action against Taiwan with the goal of annexing it with the Mainland China? China took a long time to completely take over Hong Kong. After initial noises in the West, every country settled down with the ground reality. In the case of Taiwan, how far, and for how long will the US and its allies antagonize China is a million dollar question. If China occupies Taiwan, will there be operation liberation in the Taiwan Strait. If India takes a line different from that of the US, will the US begin to distance itself from India—not to the extent of breaking ties, but limiting the scope of the strategic partnership? Still, the bigger questions remain: will the US be on India's side in the wake of another war with China? It is for sure that the US cannot give NATO type commitment, nor is India likely to accept such a proposition. But then, what will be the extent to which the US may support India. Will the US assist India at the cost of its relations with China?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

All these imponderables demand that India determines a set of guiding principles to demarcate the boundary of Indo-US defence and security cooperation. The prevailing mantras are 'multi-alignment' and 'strategic autonomy'. These two terms have been used loosely, and are not appropriately defined. It is true that rigorous exercise is necessary for the Indian strategic community to debate, discuss and come up with at least a widely acceptable set of explanations to understand 'strategic autonomy'. It is important to emphasise that 'strategic autonomy' should not connote absolute 'strategic independence'. It is not feasible to acquire 'strategic independence' like 'economic autarchy' in today's global scenarios. Complex interdependence is a better concept that clearly explains that, irrespective of military power or economic prowess, countries are a part of a complex web of interdependence. Relative gain and loss are there for sure, but going alone for maintaining economic or physical security is next to impossible.

It is in this sense that a proper explanation and some guiding principles should be crafted to guide India's defence and security relations with the US, and other major powers. Secondly, in a fast-changing global political economy and strategic scenarios, strategic autonomy cannot be a static doctrine. It

has to adjust with changing geopolitics and national requirements. Third, 'strategic autonomy' should be flexible enough to encourage major powers, such as the US to have trust in cooperative defence and security initiatives, and ward off an interpretation that 'strategic autonomy' is an opportunistic and unreliable doctrine.

In the present scenario, the US needs to understand that India's ties with Russia are not an anti-Western collaboration. Russia needs to understand that the Indian stand on the Ukraine War is not an endorsement of the Russian military adventure. Moscow also needs to accept that India does not desire to see Russia siding with China at the time of any Sino-Indian conflict in the future, while not opposing the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership amidst the Ukraine War. Fourth, should strategic autonomy mean complete 'No' to alliance formations? One of the principles of non-alignment was opposition to any form of military alliances, and Nehru was scathing in his criticism of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The rationale of non-alignment was based on allowing the followers of non-alignment principle to have the 'strategic autonomy' in foreign policy decision-making. But this principle came under serious test when China invaded India in 1962, and the US tilted in favour of Pakistan during the 1971 War. Should an Indian doctrine of 'strategic autonomy' make space for 'selective alliances', 'tactical alliances', or 'time-bound alliances' to handle unforeseen strategic challenges? All these need a thorough debate.

Fifth, it is important to underline that the Modi government, while adopting the goal of an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' was mindful of promoting 'Make in India' proposals. India also forged an understanding with the US for 'co-production' and 'co-development' of weapon systems. These kinds of flexibility are actually required to craft a 'strategic autonomy' doctrine, and make it a relative and not absolute concept.

Presently, the 'strategic autonomy' principle is often invoked by critics in India who oppose closer defence and security ties with the US. The concept should not be allowed to be a political tool to critique government initiatives. Ultimately, what is required is factoring 'strategic interests' as a key component of a 'strategic autonomy' doctrine. For example, if strategic interests face an existential threat to the country's territorial integrity, there should be a temporary suspension of 'strategic autonomy' as understood in its current form, and the new doctrine of 'strategic autonomy' should permit it. Ambiguity may serve a nation's interests temporarily, but clarity of thought and expression can help make a relationship more enduring.

Moreover, the US policymaking community should also be made aware that political interferences in the domestic affairs of India would weaken the structure of strategic cooperation with India. Indian political leaders rarely make statements on, or criticise, the domestic political issues of the United States. But the reverse is not true. The US Religious Freedom Reports, the Human Rights Reports, and some of the observations made by US Congressional leaders periodically express views on issues and developments in India that generate anti-American sentiments in India. One understands the nature of the American political system, but, increasingly, the international community feels aggrieved about the unilateral pronouncements and judgements made by the US policy community. A healthy strategic partnership demands that the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries be adhered to by both the sides. There should be mutual respect to the culture, tradition and customs in partner countries.

The US has been a superpower for a long time. Its position, policies and foreign engagements have often faced opposition, and even led to open conflict. In this age of globalisation and the information revolution, international relations have also come under transformation, with more and more reactions to international events being expressed by the public. Every government in a democracy has to respond to public opinion. The Indian public, to be specific, will not like the government of India to tolerate American interference, or undue criticism of the internal affairs of the country. When the US makes statements on Indian judicial decisions, or the government's handling of law-and-order issues, it generates ill feeling towards the US. A better understanding between India and the US to respect each other and refrain from undue political interferences in each other's affairs is a prerequisite for a stronger strategic partnership.

Indo-US defence and security cooperation and the structure of strategic partnership cannot be sustained only on the basis of joint military exercises, arms trade and technology transfer. It has to be well-rounded cooperation where the partnership should not in any way hurt the economic interests, domestic sentiments and political standings of the partner countries.

NOTES

1. Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2004.
2. 'New Framework for the U.S-India Defense Relationship', available at <http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/3211/2005-06-28%20New%20Framework%20>

- for%20the%20US-India%20Defense%20Relationship.pdf, accessed on 11 July 2024.
3. 'Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Indian Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee at the Signing of the U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Agreement', U.S. Department of State, 10 October 2008, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/10/110916.htm>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
4. When President Donald Trump raised very high tariff on imports from China, President Xi Jinping adopted a tit-for-tat policy. See Andrew Mullen, 'US-China Trade War Timeline: Key Dates and Events since July 2018', *South China Morning Post*, 29 August 2021, available at <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3146489/us-china-trade-war-timeline-key-dates-and-events-july-2018>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
5. 'Congressional Record Volume 168, Number 27 (Thursday, February 10, 2022) [Senate]', Congressional Record Online, Government Publishing Office, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2022-02-10/html/CREC-2022-02-10-pt1-PgS632-2.htm>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
6. The NATO Summit in Washington in July 2024, more than two years after the onset of the Ukraine War, focussed more on continuing to back Ukraine in the war and make it Trump-proof rather than discussing any peace proposal on how to end the war. See Michael Williams and Antoinette Radford, 'July 10, 2024, NATO's 75th Anniversary Summit', *CNN*, 10 July 2024, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/nato-summit/index.html>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
7. President Vladimir Putin visited Beijing, and held discussions with President Xi Jinping, and announced limitless friendship between Russia and China before taking military action against Ukraine. See 'Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Relations Entering a New Era, in the Context of the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries', President of Russia, 16 May 2024, available at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6132>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
8. Significantly, US efforts to normalise relations with China are meant to ensure that differences between the two countries do not escalate into conflict, rather than promoting comprehensive positive cooperation! See David Rising, 'US Defense Secretary Says War with China Neither Imminent Nor Unavoidable, Stressing Need for Talks', *Associated Press News*, 1 June 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/shangrila-dialogue-austin-china-taiwan-philippines-defense-46868bec3799f5043276d9fdeca62a41>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
9. China repeatedly warned against Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. But President Biden turned a deaf ear by saying that the White House had no control over a Congressional decision. See Yasmeen Abutaleb and Tyler Pager, 'Chinese Leader Asked Biden to Prevent Pelosi from Visiting Taiwan', *The Washington Post*,

20 August 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/20/nancy-pelosi-biden-taiwan/>, accessed on 11 July 2024.

10. Prime Minister Modi's statement that it is 'not the era of war' hit the global headlines. More recently, during his visit to Moscow in July 2024, Modi reportedly made a remark in his conversation with Putin that 'battlefields provide no solutions'. See 'No Solution to Any Conflict is Possible on the Battlefield, PM Modi Tells President Putin', *The Hindu*, 9 July 2024, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-solution-to-any-conflict-is-possible-on-the-battlefield-pm-modi-tells-president-putin/article68384993.ece>, accessed on 11 July 2024.
11. China initially considered QUAD to be an initiative that will dissipate like an 'ocean foam', but as QUAD evolved, it began to criticise the formation of 'exclusionary blocs'. See 'Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 9 March 2018, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/201803/t20180309_468677.html, accessed on 11 July 2024; and 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on March 3, 2023', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 3 March 2023, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202303/t20230303_11035507.html, accessed on 11 July 2024.