India-US Relations – Part One: A Game of Snakes and Ladders

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Key Points

- The India-US relationship has oscillated through a series of ups and downs.
- The upward trends have been caused by perceptions of mutual interests and goals on both sides.
- The downward trends in the relationship have been dictated by different approaches to achieving some of those goals.
- The relationship is once again on the upswing and appears likely to grow, given current events in the Indo-Pacific region.

Summary

The India-US relationship is best described as a series of advances and reversals that have been brought about by circumstance and perception, requirement and, to a degree, suspicion. Before 1991, India was perceived by the US as being, if not a distinct ally of the Soviet Union, at least a state that would (and more often than not did) support the USSR in many of its international dealings. This created a degree of suspicion in Washington. Other factors that prevented a relationship from developing included India’s economic policies, including its drive towards self-sufficiency, which kept the vast majority of its people firmly rooted in poverty and implicitly denied the efficacy of the US-led global system and its unwillingness to become a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The end of the
Cold War demonstrated to both, however, that their common concerns outweighed by far their differences. Both became increasingly concerned with the imbalance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, the regional rise of radical Islam, the protection of the global commons, nuclear proliferation in the region and the need to protect democratic values and processes.

The present iteration of growth and progress in the relationship is to be welcomed. It is, nevertheless, once again predicated upon India’s desire to become a major economic and military power, to fulfil its potential and to be able to resist Chinese hegemony and the desire of the US to balance China by creating an informal and loose coalition, one predicated upon the ideas and policies of democracy, and to create a new market.

Analysis

Contrary to general perception and despite its many ups and downs over the decades, the relationship between the US and India is not a more recent one. Indeed, the US, motivated by its own precepts of democracy and independence, was one of the countries that added to the overall pressure on Great Britain to terminate its colonial rule over India, even if it was primarily Indian effort that eventually prevailed in that undertaking. Unsurprisingly then, the leaders of independent India, led by its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, endeavoured to build upon this gesture of commonality. 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. This 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. This 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 in its entirety. As a previous Future Directions International paper 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.

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 this 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.

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.

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.) 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’s gesture of assistance during the war with China created suspicion about India’s motives in Washington. This, 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 (going to the extent of copying the Soviet Union’s Five-Year Plans model in an effort to uplift its own economy), 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 lowest point in 1971. In that year, India and Pakistan, which had fought two wars between 1947 and then, went to war once again. India defeated Pakistan once again, 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 this 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 was the end of the Cold War that brought about increased interaction between the US and India. The fact that India’s security guarantor, the USSR, had lost the Cold War and no longer existed, appeared to indicate at a superficial level that Pakistan, which had sided with the US, could now dominate India. In reality, however, the end of the Cold War gave the US the opportunity to diminish its relationship with Pakistan in order to re-develop its ties with India. The decision by India to re-engage with the international community in that year supported the US decision. Although there remained the nuclear non-proliferation shadow between them, both sides did not allow this to come between an economic and strategic relationship that held out the promise of huge potential. India needed the US to obtain technology and investment, for its trade and commerce and for diplomatic support. The US saw India as an emerging market for its products and services.

The détente was shattered when India conducted a second nuclear test in 1998. This test was, in fact, a series of three explosions according to Indian authorities: a 43-kiloton thermonuclear explosion, a 12-kiloton fission explosion and a 0.2-kiloton fission explosion. There remains, however, an elevated degree of scepticism about the success of the thermonuclear 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 hurried to impose a range of sanctions against India for having carried out the test and was supported by the UK, the European Union and Nelson Mandela, who had by then been canonised in the Church of Public Opinion. From the American perspective, India’s tests would have a domino effect. Pakistan would undoubtedly seek to acquire a nuclear arsenal, which would cause Israel to react by enhancing its own. This would, potentially, cause Egypt to acquire one. Moreover, once Pakistan developed its own arsenal, the A.Q. Khan network could transfer nuclear technology across the Islamic world. Not very surprisingly, then, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1172 (1998) on 6 June condemning the tests. The India-US relationship regressed once again.

It was President George W. Bush who, recognising the growing geopolitical challenges that were developing in Asia, decided to end the sanctions against India and, instead, develop, if not an alliance, at least a mutually beneficial arrangement by which India could play a part in enabling the US to meet those challenges. To this end, his administration framed the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership and, in 2005, proposed an agreement to co-operate with India in developing its civilian nuclear power, which was perceived as tacit acknowledgement and acceptance of India as a country with nuclear weapons. By doing so, Bush hoped to enable India to prevent any single country from becoming an Asian hegemon, to ensure its energy security and to better demonstrate the capability of a democratic and free economy to flourish given the right inputs.

Arguably, and more importantly, Bush’s endeavour gave rise in India to the perception, at least in some quarters, that the US once again sought to mend its relations with India. This has resulted since then in India becoming the US’s second-largest purchaser of military systems and foundational military agreements being signed with it. (The second part of this paper will deal with the military aspect of the relationship in more detail.) The economic relationship has grown and India has received the diplomatic support that it sought from the US on more than one occasion.

It must be borne in mind that the foregoing is not to imply that an alliance exists between the two countries. Many in the US remain uneasy with the notion that India has chosen to follow a strategy that places it at variance with that of the US. New Delhi has made it eminently clear on several occasions that it does not wish to be seen as, leave alone actually be, a member of a US-led alliance to counter specific countries. New Delhi instead has chosen to remain strategically autonomous and to follow its own strategies to achieve its goals. It is moving, nevertheless, away from its long-held policy of non-alignment, although that move is as yet incomplete.

The US-India relationship is on an upswing once again. Given the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, moreover, it is likely that this time around, the relationship will grow deeper over time.
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