

India Moves Toward a New Compact with the United States

By Praful Bidwai | July 14, 2005

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh begins his visit to the United States next week amidst indications that India is preparing to shed the last vestiges of its earlier policy of non-alignment and enter into a stronger, indeed unprecedented, “strategic partnership” with Washington. This would see the two countries launch joint military operations in the future, especially in the Asian continent, and collaborate politically and diplomatically to contain China. More generally, the United States would strategically “embed” itself in Asia through an alliance with India.

In return, India will probably obtain limited “benefits,” some of them intangible or questionable—including access to U.S. arms and technology, and a possible role in Washington’s scheme for reshaping the Middle East. In effect, India will have entered into a skewed relationship of a junior partnership with the United States under the new bilateral compact.

A Multi-Dimensional Relationship

There are many dimensions to the emerging India-U.S. relationship. The economic one is best highlighted by the growing outsourcing of computer software-based operations and call centers from the United States to India, as well as New Delhi’s now-compromised and more accommodating approach to American demands in global trade negotiations on services and agriculture. Just as IBM reportedly slashes 13,000 jobs in the United States and Europe, it is about to create 14,000 jobs in India.

During Singh’s visit, high-powered teams of corporate CEOs from the two countries are slated to play an important role in strengthening business exchanges and investment deals. Following the Wal-Mart CEO’s recent visit to India, Singh’s government—so far opposed, like its predecessors, to permitting the entry of wholly foreign-owned corporations into retail trade—is considering lifting this restriction.

Politically, the United States has offered to “help India become a world power in the 21st century.” It has dangled the carrot of endorsing India’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, albeit without veto power. Last month, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns stated that the United States favors a limited expansion of the number of the Council’s permanent members, by “two or so.”

He identified one state as Japan, and hinted that India might be the second because it fulfills various U.S.-defined “criteria” such as economic size, population, military capacity, commitment to democracy and human rights, financial and peacekeeping contributions to the UN, and record on counter-terrorism and non-proliferation, in addition to the Council’s overall geographic balance. He clarified that Washington’s final decision on India’s candidacy will be “political.”

New Military Framework

The military dimension is duly reflected in a far-reaching but controversial agreement called “New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relations” signed by the two governments’ defense ministers on June 28. This commits them to collaborative “multinational operations” and to strengthening their military capabilities “to promote security,” and “combat proliferation” of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). They will also have a “defense strategy” dialogue and intelligence exchanges. It also says the two will “assist in building worldwide capacity to conduct successful peacekeeping operations, with a focus on enabling other countries to field trained/capable forces for these ...”

The last clause is interpreted here to mean a crucial role for India in training Iraq’s army and police. Such a role would be especially valuable to Washington in case it decides to reduce the number of troops deployed in Iraq.

More generally, the joint collaboration idea fits in with outsourcing “low-end” operations in Asia, such as peace-keeping, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and high-value cargo escort. Washington would like Indian naval ships to escort U.S. warships through the Malacca Straits.

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Recently, a visiting U.S. official explained the rationale of India-U.S. collaboration in a closed-door briefing in India: “The worst outcome” for Washington is “an Asia from which we are excluded.” The key challenge for the United States, he said, is to prevent any other power “from dominating a given region ... If I were China ... I’d be working on kicking the United States out of Asia ... Right now, we have a lot of alliances but ... no architecture *embedding* us in Asia ...” The new agreement enables just such embedding.

The United States has long eyed India’s substantial military manpower. Washington wants to appropriate Indian troops as foot-soldiers in its global operations—much in the manner the British-Indian army was exploited to expand the Empire into the Middle East and Afghanistan.

A New Strategic Partnership?

“*The Indo-U.S. Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions*,” an October 2002 report commissioned by the Pentagon, lays out U.S. leaders’ perceptions of military cooperation with India, based on in-depth interviews with 40 senior serving U.S. officials. It concludes: “U.S. military seeks a competent military partner that can take on more responsibility for low-end operations in Asia ... which will allow the U.S. military to concentrate its resources on high-end fighting missions.”

It quotes a U.S. admiral: “[T]he United States and India both view China as a strategic threat ... though we do not discuss this publicly.” And it adds: “We want a friend in 2020 that will be capable of assisting the U.S. military to deal with a Chinese threat. We cannot deny that India will create a countervailing force to China.”

Another senior U.S. official adds: “The Indians will laud the relationship as a success if they obtain the

technology they want from the United States. We will view the relationship as a success if we are able to build a constructive military cooperation program that enables us to jointly operate with the Indians ...”

The technology India is looking for is “dual-use,” in particular nuclear power reactors, and sophisticated arms like the advanced version of the “Patriot” anti-missile system.

There is a catch, though. The “New Framework” isn’t going down well with the Indian public. The Left parties, whose support is vital for Singh, strongly oppose it. A subordinate patron-client relationship with the United States, which is in search of a global Empire, will be resented by many Indians, who are proud of their country’s history of independence in foreign policy making and autonomy in international affairs.

Singh is embarking on a gamble. It is unlikely that he will be able to sell the “new compact” easily to the domestic public.

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FOR MORE READING:

New Framework For The U.S.-India Defense Relationship
<http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/wwwhipr062905.html>

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