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INDO-US RELATIONS AND THE CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

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India-US relationship is one of the most consequential relationships of the 21st century that will greatly impact emerging strategic dimensions in Asia-Pacific and at the global strategic theatre. The increasing profile, regularity and importance accorded to the annual Indo-US strategic dialogues are testimony to the increasing engagement between these two countries. The spadework that is done before any Indo-US summit proves the importance accorded to the relationship. The emerging Indo-US strategic partnership is a vital component in the foreign policies of both India and the United States and is poised to gain increasing importance as Washington seeks to reorient its foreign policy with its rebalancing strategy towards Asia-Pacific. And, America's strategic reorientation is found largely commensurate with India's reinvigorated 'Look East Policy' that seeks a larger role for India in Asia's future. Numerous reports have fairly concluded that the rise of a powerful and democratic India in the Asian region and at the global stage is in the interest of the United States and that the sustenance of American power and influence globally and in Asia is in the interest of India. No doubt, an effective policy convergence between the two countries is vital but the road ahead, especially so between two large and functioning democracies, cannot be all roses and no thorns.

And, one of the most significant opportunities and challenges in fashioning a robust strategic commonality comes in the form of managing China's rise. America's complex tango with the Chinese leaves the Indians nervous and concerned at the prospects of a world jointly managed by a power in relative decline and a power seeing undoubted rise. Even as India and the United States see a paradigm shift in their relationship, both the countries are often found wielding different perceptions of how the countries maneuver their strategic sails in the future. If the Americans find India a reluctant partner, many in the Indian policymaking circle and the wider strategic community see the US as an unreliable power that could leave India in the lurch, if it did not serve its strategic interests. Indians remember how the American government during the Cold War, in regular fashion, offered rhetorical flourishes on how India could serve

as a democratic counterweight to the communist Chinese model, and constantly stated how the Americans had discernible stakes in the success of India. But, the same USA later on courted the Chinese through rapprochement, giving a red carpet for 'red China' to the UN Security Council. So, now, when the Americans concerned with the rise of a possible peer competitor in the eastern hemisphere, try to court India as a possible counterweight, Indians have reason to be cautious, even as Indians struggle to match the rise of an economic and a potential military behemoth across its eastern borders. Beijing's muscle flexing has been condemned by many countries in Asia, including India. In fact, many South-East Asian countries concerned of China's hyper-activity have welcomed US presence in the region to offset China's influence. The rising power capabilities of India inherently gives it the rationale to cross over the constraints imposed by the South Asia region, to reach out across its eastern borders and reconnect and revitalize its ties with the Southeast Asian countries, and inject itself into the emerging security scenario in the East Asian region. An interesting dynamics is playing out in the eastern hemisphere, most ignited by the rise of a country like China, which is now economically most integrated with the Southeast Asian countries. The Southeast Asian countries, through the ASEAN mechanism, inherently tries to preserve their regional autonomy, and has called for the inclusion of countries like India, and the United States so as to offset the unilateral rise of a country like China. And, this is commensurate as a response to China's increasing aggressive stands for its territorial marking. The Southeast Asian countries cannot ignore the influence of China in the economic linkages in the region, which has created an economic grid-network in the region. But at the same time, Southeast Asian countries do not want to be overwhelmed by a rising China. Hence, they are in the process of playing an adroit game of balancing a potential hegemon in the eastern hemisphere, making sure that China does not have a free hand in acting unilaterally in the region. The process of the East Asia Summit and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia are symptomatic of the efforts of the Southeast Asian

countries to bring other powers into the table. But, things are more complex when one looks at the bigger picture. The US, India and some South-East Asian countries have major differences with China regarding freedom of navigation, especially in the South China Sea over which Beijing claims uncontested authority. But, at the same time, economically, New Delhi, Washington and most of South-East Asia are so inter-linked to Beijing that one can hardly foresee any major conflict. Thus, when it comes to hedging China, responses are subtle and attention geared towards: 'How to manage rising China without provoking any major untoward incident having global ramifications.' Hence, just as Washington and New Delhi look for ways to control Beijing' aggression, they also prepare various diplomatic cushions so as to prevent any crash landing. Both the countries know that a China economically destabilized will not be good either for the US or India.

India has indeed emerged in many ways, from becoming independent as a poor country to one that commands an economy that is fairly consequential for the health of the global economy. By dint of its demographic and territorial size, it had the potential of being a major power in the regional and international system. Even during the Cold War, newly independent India under the leadership of its internationally popular leader Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was often found punching above its weight. India, with its leadership and the emphasis on Non-alignment was seen charting its own course, away from the strategic competition ensuing between the two superpowers then. India has often been seen as the leader of the normative kind, which despite all its attributes did not have much of a role in international agenda-sitting. However, the opening of the Indian economy provided Indian businesses the avenues to be a part of the rapidly emerging globalization, and helped put it at the centre of the story, along with faster growing neighbour China.

For instance, its economic prowess, hard power capabilities seen in the increasing modernization of the Indian military, a rising middle class, and India's increasing soft power in terms of the increasing popularity of India's cultural representations have elevated its status regionally and globally. And not to forget, India's entry, even though backdoor, to the nuclear club and moreover, a global recognition that India, despite refusing to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation treaty (NPT) has maintained an unblemished record in safeguarding its nuclear arsenal and in preventing any unwarranted transfer of

technology and also in respecting its unilateral moratorium on further nuclear testing. The continuation of the Indian nuclear programme despite the opposition and chagrin of the western countries, and the eventual testing of nuclear weapons right under the noses of the western powers, led the path for its much debated elevation from a "middle power" to an "emerging power".

For long, India has been seen as a leader and cheerleader in the developing world and a voice for the least developed countries at the global arena. But, India is undergoing a phase of transition, as it shows signs of graduating from a mere developing country, to an emerging potential power player, and whose voice would not only be heard but listened to at the high table of agenda-setting in global affairs. The direction of global affairs has largely been determined by a handful of powers that have the capabilities and also the willingness to shape the course of international affairs. China's rise has often loomed larger than that of India's in the sheer scale of growth and implications in regional and global affairs. Nevertheless, India despite deficient capabilities in relative terms and the much debated lack of political will, garners much attention regarding what probable role it could play in the changing global order. And, when it comes to India's currency to rising status in the global scheme of things, no relationship is more consequential than the one between India and the United States. Irrespective of the presence of many naysayers on both sides, who frequently discount the increasing salience of this relationship, Indo-US relations has indeed traversed a long path and has certainly crossed a threshold in terms of increasing convergence and confidence in each other. If for India, the US is important as a global power that could substantially help push up India's influence globally, as it did with the signing of the civilian nuclear agreement and helping India gain the NSG waiver, India is equally important for the furtherance of US foreign policy objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. India with its size geographically and demographically, an enduring democratic political system and increasing power capabilities could be what some call the "swing state" in the changing global order. And defence cooperation between the two countries spanning across all the forces is an inevitable component of any American strategic plan to share more with India in terms of maintaining security and sustaining strategic stability in Asia-Pacific. In fact, a strategic partnership cannot be envisioned without a robust defence component. In recent years, India has awarded around \$9 billion worth defence contracts to US companies. Major sanctions on Indian defence entities have been lifted

and now mutual business interest exists. India needs high-grade defence technologies from the US and Washington needs India's defence market to create more jobs in America's defence industries. As America has not been India's major supplier there are many challenges largely in differences vis-à-vis procurement laws. The US is very restrictive about technical know-how of its weapon systems and has laws which restrict transfer of technology. And many in the Indian side still have some reservations in going too close to the Americans for weapons procurement. They are concerned about possible American demands for political concessions and compromises that might, in turn, erode India's strategic autonomy. And, when one assesses the present and the future of the Indo-US relationship, there is a need to factor in history as well. One needs to understand that the two countries were practically on opposite sides of the fence during the Cold War. The Non-Aligned movement (NAM) was conceived during the Cold War with India as a founding member so that newly independent countries like India could stay out of the global race for supremacy between the US and Soviet Union. Western countries including the US were blinded by the Cold War power race whereby US officials deemed Non-alignment hypocritical and leaning towards the Soviet Union. India had to take the help of the Soviet Union on various occasions, after the United States roped in Pakistan as an alliance member in its containment strategy against Communism. During the Cold War, Washington often wrongly equated Non-Alignment with 'neutrality'. The basic idea behind Non-Alignment was to enable newly independent countries to make independent decisions based on the merit of the matter, keeping their national interests in mind. Clearly, reticence as expected from neutral countries was not the nature of Non-Aligned countries. Non-Alignment was about maintaining independence to take independent decisions and not about remaining mute and neutral spectators. Structural constraints imposed by the Cold War period circumscribed all other areas of commonalities that the political value-system in the two countries provided. Understanding of core shared values between the countries never really translated into shared interests that could create avenues of cooperation.

The two countries today share a larger strategic vision that looks at the security and stability in the Asian region, and to preclude any destabilizing role that China's rise could play. India and the United States can jointly play a stabilizing force in the emerging Asian balance of power, making sure that no unilateral force emerges in the region whose influence writ large would

be detrimental for both India's and America's interests. There is an overriding sense of priority accorded to the relationship, and both the countries stand high at the ladder of strategic preferences in Washington as well as New Delhi. The much mentioned bi-partisan support for the Indo-US relationship in Washington still holds ground, and similarly in New Delhi, the emerging strategic partnership, despite constraints, has grown under both BJP and Congress led governments. The people-to-people contacts between the two countries, and growing economic and political leverage of the Indian diaspora in the US is a major asset that any government in New Delhi should seriously harness.

It is politically naïve to expect big-bang deals like the Indo-US nuclear agreement to happen often, especially between two democracies like the US and India, with large bureaucracies and so many constituencies to take care of. Even as the two countries struggle to fully implement the nuclear deal, one cannot brush off the positive dividends that the signing of the agreement created in other fields, the most significant of which is defence cooperation. Serious challenges do lie towards bridging the public sector-private sector divide when it comes to defence co-production between the two countries. But, both sides have jointly endorsed the need for efforts towards streamlining some of the pertinent issues in defence trade cooperation. As stated, history does not disappear soon, and as such, there are still lingering concerns and a persisting mistrust between the two countries, reminiscent of the Cold War period. And, this lack of trust between the two countries is something that spills over and impedes both sides from going ahead full-steam on issues spreading across the political, economic, security and strategic realms. US leaders like Vice President Joe Biden have said that there need not be any contradiction between 'strategic autonomy' and 'strategic partnership'. But when it comes to policy implementations, the devils lie in the details and India and the United States have serious challenges in terms of ironing out the tactical difficulties in areas of cooperation that the larger convergence is offering.

Many western commentators have criticized India as a 'naysayer' when it comes to taking up international responsibilities and burden-sharing. India traditionally has had many 'lakshman rekhas' or taboos when it comes to international engagements, especially so with great powers, and a not so exemplary history of 'Indo-US relationship' has not helped matters. But, it is also true that as India's power capabilities increases, and the horizons of its national interest extends beyond

the inner circle of South Asia, it is gradually developing the intention and willingness to get into the shoes of a 'great power'. And as the US tries to preserve its pre-eminence in the Asian continent amidst debates regarding its relative decline, and as India's foreign policy becomes more commensurate with its increasing capabilities, the two countries are on a convergent path that can be ignored only at the peril of prime mutual interests. As the joint statement from the latest Singh-Obama summit in September 2013, pointed out, "...The two countries have crossed a threshold in their relations where both recognize that successes at home and abroad are further advanced by their cooperation."

What is needed from the Indian side at least, is to come up with a strategic plan vis-à-vis the India-US relationship, wherein along with the 'lakshman rekhas' of Indian foreign policy, it also lays out, in clearer terms, what India can and is willing to invest in its partnership with the United States. A more nuanced understanding and clearer view is required of why India and the US need each other, what the US expects India to do, and what India is willing to do, what India wants the US to do, and what the US is capable of and willing to do. A greater convergence can only come from a more honest understanding and acceptance of differences, rather than harbouring utopian ideas of commonalities. The rising power debate also takes into account more burden-sharing on the managing the global commons, that include oceans, air, outer space and the cyberspace. Preventing and fighting the 'tragedy of global commons' is a pivotal part of what the US and India can do together. The 'global commons' face increasing vulnerabilities such as terrorism; piracy issues threatening vital sea-lanes, cyber-attacks, etc. The US command over the global commons has been fundamental to its primacy in global affairs and a mutual understanding between the US and India could benefit both the countries: the US, a power in relative decline, with its command over the commons also declining and India, an emerging power, which, because of its increasing power capabilities, can contribute significantly to the management and security of global commons. India's increasing capabilities at sea, land, air and outer space, will increasingly push it into the higher echelons of agenda-setting and decision-making, and would put it on the radar screens of other major powers. While an element of competition and relative scaling of resources will ensue, especially with countries like China that has major security divergences with India; increasingly capabilities could also create avenues of cooperation among countries. There are

lots of factors that pull India and the US together. Nevertheless the ties cannot be taken for granted. 'Strategic partnership' is the most frequently, and for want of alternatives, one of the most overused phrases in international relations. But a sober analysis of relations, beyond the glares of high flying diplomatic meets is needed to reassess the various nuts and bolts of any relationship and put them in their proper places, with the prospects and the challenges accurately identified. Carpers of the Indo-US relationship have, of late, come up with the argument that the relationship is seeing a long lull period and that the relationship has been oversold, more than its worth. But officials from both the sides have contended that that is certainly not the case and that the relationship is where it should be. There are indeed areas of concern in terms of the economic outlook in both the countries. India's growth story has slackened in recent times with many doubting the optimistic picture painted about India. And, the United States is going through a sluggish recovery in the aftermath of a recession that in its severity and impact is comparable only to the Great Depression in the 1930s. And, many questions have been raised on the issue of US foreign orientations and the level of its international involvement in the midst of economic and domestic challenges. But to take a an 'ought to be' view of the relationship, times of adversities like the one that the two countries are facing today should be seen as an opportunity to prove that the relationship is there to endure and that it is not merely transactional in nature. Concerns abound regarding the future trajectory of the so-called 'defining partnership' of the 21st century. The relationship, of late, has been at the receiving end of many critics. It has been labeled as having 'plateaued', and lacking bold initiatives, that could take the relationship to the next level. There are a host of issues, where the two governments have much to be concerned of each other moves, including the implementation of the Indo-US nuclear deal, and issues like the NSA snooping on Indian entities, the US immigration reform and implications for Indian skilled labour, including the economic mess that both the countries are undergoing. But, New Delhi and Washington have made it clear that tactical differences over issues important to both sides, are not going to derail the overall convergence existent in the relationship. It was the absence of such a working relationship between the two governments that inhibited many chances of cooperation during the Cold War. Now that has changed for good, and one should be optimistic that the relationship has reached a stage where it can maturely weather differences in a bilateral format.