

India and the United States: neither adversaries nor allies

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Relations between the United States and India have traveled a bumpy road over the decades. Throughout the Cold War, New Delhi proclaimed a policy of nonalignment *vis-à-vis* Washington's bitter rivalry with the Soviet Union. US leaders, especially during the administrations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, viewed India's professed neutralism with more than a dollop of skepticism. From their prospective, New Delhi's alleged neutrality had a distinct pro-Soviet tilt - and, indeed, Indian policies on a host of issues seemed to align with Moscow's preferences. As a result, Washington's relations with India were marked by a pronounced chill that was slow to dissipate even after the Soviet Union collapsed.

In recent years, though, bilateral economic relations have surged and there has been at least a modest rapprochement on diplomatic and security issues. Some American pundits and foreign policy experts openly regard India as a crucial partner in the efforts to contain China's growing influence in East and Southeast Asia. That hope is not irrational, but it is excessive. India's concern about China's geopolitical ambitions is quite real, and New Delhi is taking steps to counter Beijing, including measures to strengthen its military capabilities in the Indian Ocean and beyond. But Indian leaders don't want to generate needless tension with China, and, in fact, they are simultaneously exploring ways to broaden bilateral economic ties. New Delhi also seeks to contain, even downplay, its long-standing border dispute with China. Both current Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his immediate predecessor, Manmohan Singh, have stuck to that balanced policy, even though they come from rival political parties.

The prospects for close cooperation between the US and New Delhi are even more limited with respect to issues other than the containment of Chinese power. India's ties with Russia remain robust, as evidenced by the delivery of a \$2.3 billion Russian-built aircraft carrier to the Indian navy in early November. Although India has sought to diversify its sources of military hardware, New Delhi is still Russia's largest arms customer. The Indian government also has sought to remain aloof from the escalating feud between the West and Russia over Moscow's annexation of Crimea and its support of the separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

Additionally, there is minimal common ground between the United States and India regarding sanctions against Iran. Indian leaders do not wish to see Iran join the ranks of the world's nuclear weapons powers, but they have resisted Western efforts to isolate the clerical regime and impose ever-tightening economic restrictions. Indeed, New Delhi has been involved in a fairly substantial "grey market" trade in Iranian oil for years, and Indian administrations have

repeatedly dragged their feet regarding the enforcement of banking and other international financial restrictions directed against Tehran.

In this context, the potential for US-India security cooperation is the most promising with respect to curbing China's power projection capabilities. Indian authorities are clearly worried about Beijing's "Silk Road" strategy to enhance economic, political, and military ties with nations throughout Central and South Asia. Xi Jinping's announcement in early November of a \$40 billion Silk Road infrastructure fund to be managed by Chinese banks is not likely to ease those concerns. Even before that announcement, Xi's government launched a \$1.4 billion port city development project in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. Given that country's geographic proximity and substantial security relevance, India's leadership could hardly regard that move as a friendly act.

Indian leaders are understandably uneasy about Beijing's ambitious economic program, correctly concluding that it is designed to extend China's geopolitical reach. They are even more apprehensive about the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi expressed "strong concerns" to the government of Sri Lanka in early November about the reported presence of Chinese submarines in Sri Lankan ports.

Not only is India building up its own naval capabilities in response to China's assertive activities, but it is establishing new military ties with Vietnam and Japan, countries that are also worried about the extent of Beijing's ambitions. Prime Minister Modi announced in late October that his country would supply Hanoi with naval vessels and would significantly deepen India's involvement in Vietnam's energy sector. Tokyo and New Delhi have muted their previously sharp differences over India's nuclear weapons arsenal and have commenced a security dialogue that reflects their mutual concerns about Beijing's growing military power.

The United States can benefit from India's strategic calculations regarding China - but only if Washington is content to be an indirect beneficiary. Although New Delhi is worried about Beijing's intentions and capabilities, it is not likely to enlist openly in a US-directed containment policy against its neighbor. Instead, Indian leaders seem intent on developing a hedging strategy. That means fostering some security ties with Washington, and even more so with regional powers such as Vietnam and Japan, but not closing the door on constructive relations with China. US policymakers must be satisfied with the modest strategic benefits flowing from that situation.

Washington must be even more cautious about pressing India to embrace US policy on issues other than China. In particular, that means accepting New Delhi's *de facto* neutrality regarding US disputes with countries such as Iran and Russia. US and Indian interests overlap on some issues, and Washington can enjoy quiet bilateral cooperation on those occasions. But India gives no indication of wanting to be an official US ally, much less an obedient junior partner in US-led security policies that provide few benefits from the standpoint of India's interests. US leaders must accept that India will play a cautious, sometimes ambivalent, role as neither an adversary nor an ally.

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