

INDO-US CONVERGENCE OF AGENDA IN THE NEW INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT Strengthened Indo-US proximity has become a notable factor in the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region, and also it raises ongoing concerns about its robustness. This article analyses the geostrategic, geoeconomic, security-related and defence-connected Indo-US relations in the region over the last two decades, highlighting the growing multidimensional convergence of US and Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture. In the final part, this article also sketches the future implications of Indo-US proximity and seeks to identify potential risks.

KEYWORDS: *China, India, Indo-Pacific region, Indo-US relations, Pakistan, security, terrorism, USA*

Introduction: Shifting Strategic Alliances

As the world enters further into the Asian Century, the USA, India, Japan and member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have forged several bilateral and multilateral alliances to secure an enduring balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region (IPR), especially in response to recent assertive Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Earlier, when world history was dominated by the Cold War (Dutt, 1999: 70), pitting the US-led capitalist ideology against communist regimes led by Russia, which was between 1922 and 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), South Asia was deemed to have far less geostrategic importance than it claims and enjoys at present. The USA and Russia as leading superpowers, at loggerheads with each other about global domination (Kennedy, 1987), were not directly involved in warfare. However, this prolonged multilevel combat created a bipolar world order (Basrur, 2008; Dutt, 1999; Kennedy, 1987) which has recently been experiencing realignment (Kumar, 2015). Developments have to some extent

been driven by India which after the collapse of the USSR sought 'alternatives to the current monopolar global power structure, in which the US is pre-eminent' (Fair, 2009: 136), indicating that India favours a multipolar structure, involving India, China, the European Union and the USA.

The history of Indo-US relations during the Cold War period has suffered uncertainties and deep mistrust for a long time (Kapur, 2010; Kumar & Shah, 2018). In early post-independent India after 1947, Indo-US relations remained ambivalent due to the earlier dominant Cold War priorities. However, the USA soon became the largest aid donor to India after Washington, probably reluctantly, identified India as a major actor and ally in US efforts to counter global communism (Bajpai & Pant, 2013). The USA even supported India diplomatically and militarily during the Indo-Chinese war in 1962. However, soon Indo-US relations experienced serious strains when the USA extended certain favours to Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 (Bajpai & Pant, 2013). Thereafter, under Nehru's leadership, India shifted more towards a mixed economic structure and moved ideologically closer to the USSR. Consequently, the USA became highly suspicious about the hybrid, socialist design of the Indian economy and provided even stronger support to Pakistan which emerged as a major non-NATO US ally. The USA also used the Pakistan card to counter Soviet influence in South Asia and to strengthen its own geostrategic influence in the IPR. Meanwhile India established a quasi-military alliance with Russia prior to the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, while the USA openly provided Pakistan military and diplomatic support against India. As much of the extensive literature confirms, however, South Asia was earlier more like an adjunct to the global bipolar pattern, rather than a player in its own right.

Since about 2000, though, the USA and India 'have worked to fundamentally reorder the strategic underpinnings of their bilateral ties as well as the substance of their engagement' (Fair, 2009: 131). US President Clinton and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee, following India's nuclear tests in May 1998 (Nayar, 2001), began a 'Strategic Dialogue' (Fair, 2009: 131), reflecting growing recognition in Washington so that India was becoming 'a major Asian power of some consequence' (Fair, 2009: 132). At that time, China's role was not yet as prominent as it is at present.

Regarding South Asia, gradually, both the US-Pakistan connections, which Nazar (2016) has traced for Pakistan, and the Indo-US relationship became over time more complex. Following India's first nuclear test in Pokhran in 1974, growing mistrust led to an initial cooling of relations between India and the USA. However, towards the end of the 1990s, Indo-US relations were again debated among intellectuals (Pant, 2013). The relationship became highly strained again when India conducted more nuclear tests in 1998 (Nayar, 2001) and the USA imposed economic and nuclear sanctions on India. The obvious reason for this was that India had not signed major US-sponsored treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to avoid nuclear proliferation (Pant, 2013). However, having developed some affinity earlier because of India's economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, US

policymakers, especially after 9/11 in 2001, reconsidered their approaches to South Asia. Now the USA began to give more priority to India, particularly in countering international terrorism. Under President Bush, following expert policy advice, 'the US sought to de-couple its relations with India and Pakistan, in a process that has become known as "de-hyphenation" in New Delhi, Islamabad and Washington' (Fair, 2009: 132). Since 2001, Indo-US relations have expanded to involve 'important stakeholders with vested interests in the relationship' (Fair, 2009: 133), including the huge Indo-American community.

A major reinvigoration occurred when US foreign policy moved yet more closely towards India and took the grand initiative of signing the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2005 (Fair, 2009: 134). This significant shift of US foreign policy towards South Asia, to sign a nuclear treaty with a nation which had not acceded to the NPT and the CTBT, indicates that India was now treated as a responsible nuclear nation by US policymakers. Since the USA sought to increase its geostrategic alliances in the IPR, a more resilient partnership with India, in light of its multidimensional key role in the region, made good sense. While India asserted at that time its position of pre-eminence in South Asia and as an emergent global power, reduced US opposition to India's nuclear ambitions was critical, together with the endorsement of President Bush, for India's emergence as an extra-regional military power (Fair, 2009: 134). Of course, India had its own larger geostrategic and geopolitical ambitions. While New Delhi was becoming more proactive about the US strategic pivot, it also developed its own 'Look East' Strategy (Fair, 2009: 136), later called 'Act East Policy', increasingly with a view to confronting Chinese advances in the region.

Therefore, both India and the USA seem to have abandoned their historical hesitations and reservations about each other to move towards a new regional alignment in South Asia in order to strengthen common geostrategic, economic and security interests in the entire IPR. This may reflect certain innovations from a US perspective, but from a historically informed non-alignment position India has been nobly active in cultivating relations with many states, several of which share adversarial relations. In this context, India also made 'astute use of regional frameworks' (Fair, 2009: 139), such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN. Although the various Indian initiatives challenge delusions of US global domination, the USA seems to have understood that it needs India to achieve its strategic policy objectives.

The main purpose of the present article is to trace various aspects of this growing Indo-US convergence within this broader geostrategic context to assess key components of its dimensions and also to gauge, finally, potential risks.

Convergence of Indo-US Interests in the IPR al Security Architecture

The concept of regional cooperation, popularised after the Second World War, later turned into the concept of 'Regional Security Complex' (RSC), developed by Buzan

(1988). This described regional security as the need to find some systematic framework or mechanism under new dynamic situations in a particular region, at first focused on Southeast Asia. Maritime security dilemmas among Indo-Pacific littoral countries were increasingly felt after China's military modernisation. The ways in which Beijing dealt with the South China Sea disputes as part of its zero-sum game created security concerns not only for ASEAN countries, but also for the USA, India and Japan. Therefore, the maritime security dilemma felt among these nations generated the concept of Asian Super Complex (ASC) regarding regional security of the IPR (Buzan, 1988; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). More recently, different regional security centres such as Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the South Asian countries have been reconceptualised regarding their geostrategic concerns, leading towards the 'Great Asian Security Complex' (GASC), identified by Kumar (2015) and Kumar and Shah (2018). India has taken a key role in this, largely due to security concerns over its protracted boundary disputes with Beijing. As an emerging superpower, India is also conscious about the implications of sea power to protect its own ambitions in the Asian Century.

To discuss this regional security architecture of the IPR in a global context, it is necessary to understand the basic nature of the region as a combination of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This huge IPR is home to almost 3.5 billion people, with a collective Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around US\$20 trillion (Singh, 2014). Bounded by the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf on its Western sides, it extends to the Eastern Pacific Ocean, the Marshall Islands and even Hawaii, a US state, on the Eastern side. The strategic position of multiple maritime checkpoints within this vast oceanic territory makes the Asian core regions extremely volatile as a political theatre, as recent conflicts over commercial sea traffic and piracy have illustrated (Singh, 2014: 94). Checkpoints cover major sea routes through the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, Hormuz, Malacca and Sunda. Particularly since energy security concerns have assumed prominence in recent years (Fair, 2009: 139), the USA also appreciates India's prominent role in securing sea lanes (Fair, 2009: 150). The region contains and connects the three largest economies of Asia, namely China, India and Japan, sharing approximately 25 per cent of America's, 68 per cent of India's and 80 per cent of China's shipments from the Indian Ocean region (Singh, 2014).

The term 'Indo-Pacific' was first used in Australian foreign policy debates to create the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council (IPFC) in 1948 (Singh, 2014) and was mentioned at various times in US reports and official statements during the Cold War period. However, the IPR is also a currently reimagined polystrategic entity due to recent developments in cultural, economic, geostrategic, geopolitical and maritime connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. This became evident in South Asia when India's former Foreign Secretary, Ranjan Mathai, said in February 2012 that 'our partnership is essential for building a stable, prosperous and secure Asia-Pacific region—or, as some here have begun to call it, the Indo-Pacific' (Scott, 2012: 92). India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also used this term in the

India–ASEAN Summit in 2012 (Scott, 2012: 93), indicating that India's attention has been shifting towards constructing the region as a collective regional security architecture, in which India sees itself as a key power. For that reason, too, India has sought to increase its geostrategic and defence engagements with the USA and other regional powers such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and the ASEAN countries.

After the 9/11 attacks, the US geostrategic pivot has certainly led to stronger acceptance of the term Indo-Pacific, mainly due to overlaps of US maritime, commercial and security interests in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions with those of India. Since the start of the twenty-first century, the USA has identified the IPR as the centre of global gravity in view of new forms of geostrategic and geopolitical turmoil in Asia (Scott, 2012: 89–90). To secure its own maritime strategic and economic interests in this vast region, this pushed US foreign policymakers to reassess and reconstruct their geostrategic and geopolitical alignment with littoral countries of the IPR. Therefore, not only has India become activated, but also over the last two decades the USA has redesigned its geostrategic, defence and diplomatic alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea and the ASEAN countries. Central for the present analysis, India has emerged as one of the major geostrategic US partners in this vast region. Due to the evident intersectionality of geopolitical, economic and security-related factors, at present there is a notable convergence of interests in Indo-US relations regarding the IPR. Five major areas have shown positive trends in the formation of stronger Indo-US relations over the last two decades. These started with new proximity on global terrorism, geostrategic and economic partnerships and then security and defence partnerships. The sections below examine these aspects in turn.

Concerns over Global Terrorism

A drastic shift occurred in Indo-US relations after the 9/11 attacks in America due to the emerging common visualisation of facing global terrorism and the need for combined retaliation (Marks, 2006). The 9/11 events in 2001 were a major attack on US internal security and led to the 'War on Terror' policy, with significant impacts in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Nazar, 2016). Then, 3 months later, India faced a massive terrorist attack on 13 December 2001 on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. One could therefore argue that India experienced its own 9/11 moment. Bangladesh, too, though globally unnoticed, suffered its own 9/11 event, when 500 bombs were detonated simultaneously on 17 August 2005 (Hasan, 2011: 98). After India faced another major terrorist attack in Mumbai, its commercial capital, on 26 November 2008, it seems that as common victims of global terrorism, India and the USA both decided to increase their geostrategic and geopolitical partnership to strengthen their common traditional and non-traditional security interests in the region (Mahadevan, 2012). The US realised around this time that its earlier policy to ignore India's security concerns was wrong. Fair (2009: 140) observed that 'Washington appreciates India's concerns regarding Pakistan's contribution to New Delhi's domestic woes and

regional insecurity'. The USA at that time began to accept India's perception on terrorism (Fair, 2009: 145) and related claims regarding security risks in the region, especially those arising from transboundary terror groups in neighbouring Pakistan, as well as Chinese aggression. Following the US reassessment of its policies, especially after 9/11, India began to support the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces in Afghanistan to diminish the influence of terrorist groups. New Delhi also welcomed the killing of Osama-bin Laden by American Navy Seal commandos in 2011 at Abbottabad in Pakistan. Moreover, in the Heart of Asia Conference in 2016, the 14 nations' declarations to stabilise Afghanistan in the region for the first time recognised the Jaish-e-Mohammed, Laskar-e-Taiba and Haqqani networks as terrorist groups based in Pakistan (Kumar, 2019; Mahadevan, 2012). However, China initially vetoed Indian efforts to declare the Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Maulana Masood Azhar as a global terrorist in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), reflecting its all-weather friendship with Pakistan (Nazar, 2016). Later, China agreed regarding Masood Azhar under a UNSC proposal moved by the UK, France and the USA (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Haidar, 2017). The US State Department also announced that the USA will consider Hizbul Mujahideen as a global terrorist group, based in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Notably, this step was taken by the USA before a scheduled visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the USA. Such snippets of evidence reflect growing commitment from both sides in dealing with the threat of global terrorism. India and the USA also agreed to share intelligence and intensify cooperation to diminish terrorism in the IPR. India also exposed Pakistan-based terrorist groups in various regional and international platforms, including SAARC, the G-20 Summit and more recently in the 9th Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) Summit in September 2017 held at Xiamen in China. The USA now strongly supports India's efforts to counter global terrorism on the international stage, boosting American Indo-Pacific regional security collaborations with India and other littoral countries in the region. As elaborated further later, this clearly involves wider geostrategic, political and economic agenda and also relates to recent developments regarding Kashmir.

Strengthened Geostrategic Partnership

Driven by the terrorism-related events of 9/11, the two countries formally established a closer geostrategic partnership in 2004, followed by the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement as a major accomplishment to fortify their strategic partnership. This ranges from energy, security and defence to technological and space advancements. Despite India not being a signatory to the NPT, it has signed a treaty in 2008 with the USA called the '123 Civilian Nuclear Agreement' under some specific conditions (Chari, 2009; Hosur, 2010; Jangir, 2012; Kapur, 2010), reflecting the shared concerns and interests of the Bush administration and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to shape future Indo-US relations. This treaty enhanced India's position in the global world

order as a responsible nuclear power, since India has accepted that it will not share its nuclear technology with non-nuclear nations for military purposes (Singh, 2013).

The IPR is now acknowledged by both India and the USA as an increasingly important site for the geostrategic convergence of their respective maritime interests. This drastic change of US foreign policy involves the USA moving away from a Trans-Atlantic focus towards the IPR. As indicated, latent uncertainties over US-Pakistan relations after the 9/11 attacks led US policymakers to strengthen alignments with India. US recognition of the geostrategic importance of the greater Indian Ocean region gives a key role to India, since the Indian Ocean region has enormously important maritime sea routes of great strategic significance. A Congressional Research Report of 2012 (Martin et al., 2015) estimates that 50 per cent of world container traffic and 70 per cent of ship-borne oil and petroleum transit through the sea routes of the Indian Ocean region. The USA belatedly realised that without Indian collaboration it cannot effectively secure its various geostrategic interests in this region. Fair (2009: 149) further highlighted that 'India's relevance to the US derives in part because of its utility in checking China's unchallenged rise in Asia'.

Although it has special defence treaties with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and other ASEAN countries, the USA has recently reinvigorated its connections with Japan and several ASEAN countries to enhance its own role in the Asian Century. When she was US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton called Asia critical to the future of the USA and appraised the US engagement as vital for Asia's future (Clinton, 2011). She focused on six key parameters for analysing the US pivot in the region, namely strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging broad-based military presence and advancing democracy and human rights (Clinton, 2011). Therefore, in its second term, the Obama administration mainly focused on the Asia-Pacific region. Glimpses of the US 'Asia-Pivot Policy' appeared in November 2011 when President Obama announced during a speech in Australia's parliament that the USA intends to play a larger long-term role in reshaping the Asia-Pacific region and its future (Manyin et al., 2012).

Since then, US policymakers have consistently focused on the IPR and its geostrategic importance and President Trump's desire to undo much of Obama's policy seems to have had little impact here. The security of this particular region has remained in the hands of the oldest US command, the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM), with headquarters in Hawaii. This controls almost 50 per cent of the earth's surface and nearly 60 per cent of the globe's population. USPACOM is responsible for monitoring the vast area from Alaska to Madagascar and from India to the South Pacific and also has serving subordinate unified commands (Vaughn, 2007). To strengthen its geostrategic and diplomatic rebalancing of the region, the USA is strongly developing its relations with countries of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS) and SAARC countries. The new key reason behind this

substantial shift of attention, connected to Trump's overall approach to China, appears to be a desire to maintain the balance of power in the IPR against growing Chinese claims. Various uncertainties behind US foreign policy and its relative decline in the Middle East, Afghanistan and more recently Trump's inability to control North Korea's nuclear programme have generated sceptical caution in the minds of Indian policy-makers. However, India itself has meanwhile extended efforts to enhance its geostrategic and geopolitical concerns in the IPR, and it certainly helps that India is viewed by US policymakers as capable of challenging the maritime expansion of China. However, Russia's new regional shift towards Southeast Asia, combined with India's revised 'Act East' policy, also opposes China's vertical move (Kaplan, 2012). All these new trends explain India's tendency to favour a stronger geostrategic partnership with the USA and underpin the convergence of their mutual interests, especially regarding Chinese port developments in the Indian Ocean region (Mohan, 2013). India is particularly distrustful about these new port constructions in the region, since Beijing could use such ports for military purposes. Moreover, India's boundary disputes with Beijing over the Himalayan region remain a major concern, so that the multidimensional geostrategic proximity in Indo-US relations has amplified and further complicated this new regional security paradigm in the region during the last two decades.

Growing Economic Partnership

Following earlier mistrust for largely ideological reasons, as discussed earlier, the Indo-US economic partnership began in earnest in 2004 when both sides entered strategic dialogues, accompanied by bilateral economic engagements. After becoming Prime Minister in mid-2014, Narendra Modi showed commitment to a new economic partnership during his first US visit in September 2014. Many economic and strategic experts now consider the Indo-US economic partnership as a landmark geopolitical shift for both sides (Akhtar et al., 2014). Since the USA seeks more trade and service relations with India, trade is expected to reach almost US\$500 billion annually by 2024 compared with US\$97 billion in 2013 (Akhtar et al., 2014). The USA now tops the list of India's trading partners, with almost 13 per cent of exports and 5 per cent of imports from the USA. In fact, the USA is one of the countries with which India's trade is in surplus compared with China and other economic partners. Both India and the USA are therefore keen to increase their future economic partnership.

Regarding foreign direct investment (FDI), the USA invested US\$28 billion in India in 2012 compared with US\$51 billion in China. The US-India Business Council (USIBC) has cheered the Modi government's announcement to increase FDI in the insurance and defence sectors, which are most significant domains for increasing economic partnership. Obviously, this will open the Indian market for US defence and nuclear supply companies. Additionally, the Indo-US Trade Policy Forum (TPF), established in 2005, addressed several issues related to trade and investment after 2014. The Modi government, determined to enrich the structural

and overall growth of the Indian economy, also launched the 'Make in India' project to attract foreign investors into India to boost infrastructure and investment demands in the Indian market. In September 2015, Modi's visit to the Silicon Valley reflected India's enhanced aspirations for 'Digital India', the Smart Cities Project, education, health and technology innovations. In international fora and organisations, both India and the USA have cultivated greater economic cooperation, especially as members of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

More recently, both India and the USA agreed to promote the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) to increase regional cooperation with concerned partners, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and the ASEAN alliance (Sundaraman, 2017). Major reasons behind these initiatives are evidently to counterbalance Chinese antagonism in the South China Sea dispute, to prevent more Chinese interloping in the IPR, and the desire to match China's ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) project through both sea and land routes. As an active IPEC partner, India has serious reservations about OBOR, especially the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which is going through PoK. Here, too, economic, geostrategic and political concerns intersect. Since the USA is determined to intensify its trade and commercial relations with the greater IPR, both India and the USA are showing positive gestures towards the new regional IPEC construction, reflecting the intensified convergence of their shared economic interests.

Security and Defence Partnership

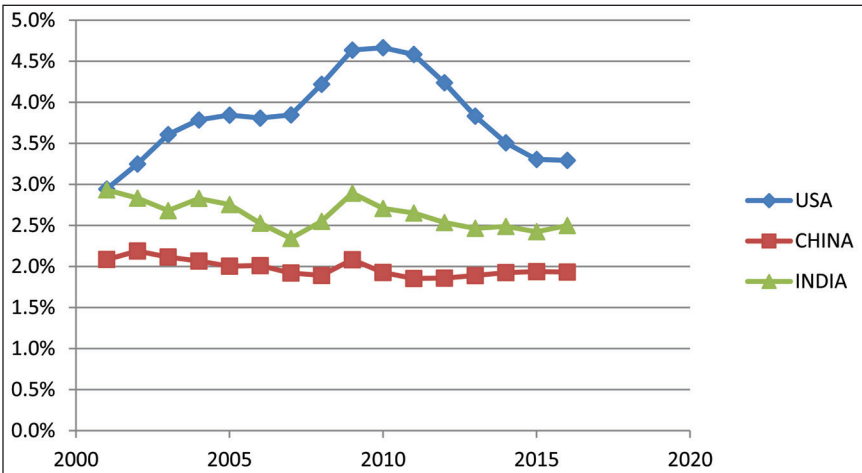
There are other important reasons behind the new closer security alignment in Indo-US defence relations during the last decade, including several justifications behind a new defence alignment. First, as already noted, after 9/11 both the USA and India realised that they face similar security threats from terrorists. Their shared commitment to coordinated action against such global terrorism in international platforms is manifested in efforts to ban terrorist organisations which harm their security interests all over the world. Therefore, both countries signed the landmark defence treaty called Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in October 2016. This provides both militaries access to facilities for supplies and repairs, again therefore involving also important economic and trade-related dimensions. A joint statement at the time indicated that their partnership increased strategic and regional cooperation to deepen military-to-military exchanges and to expand collaboration on defence technology and innovation, as R. Lakshmi reported in *The Washington Post* of 30 August 2016. Both India and the USA also signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in September 2018. This will facilitate New Delhi's acquisition of new defence technologies and will strengthen communication networks among the Indian and US armed forces (Pubby, 2018).

Countering rapid enlargement of China military capacities, influence and ambitions has become another important intent behind the Indo-US strategic and security partnership in the region. China modernised its military capabilities and increased

its military budget to approximately US\$119 billion in 2013 compared with US spending on defence of nearly US\$700 billion (Khobragade, 2014). India’s defence budget in the financial year 2017–2018 reached approximately ₹3,59,854 crore (US\$ 53.5 billion). This is still quite low compared with China, but is said to be linked with the lower economic potential of the Indian economy (Behera, 2017). This is confirmed, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook for 2016 (Smith, 2016), as China spent 1.9 per cent of its GDP on the defence budget in 2016 compared with 2.5 per cent of GDP share by India. To enhance understanding of the three countries’ seriousness about military preparedness, Figure 1 shows the defence expenditure of the USA, China and India in relation to their respective share of GDP in 2001–2016. Therefore, India’s policymakers understand that to face various Chinese challenges in the IPR, India needs to achieve closer geostrategic proximity with the USA to construct a reliable balance of power in the IPR. The Indo-US defence trade reached US\$10 billion yearly over the last decades (Chadha, 2013). According to the SIPRI Yearbook of 2018 (Smith, 2018), India has significantly increased its defence imports from the USA, Isreal and France in 2014–2018, rather than from Russia.

China has notably enlarged its engagement with North and South East Asian regional stakeholders to strengthen its economic influence with these countries. It also harbours aspirations to intensify its active involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with Russia and other countries to counter the NATO influence in Asia. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced during the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit in Shanghai in June 2014 that ‘[s]ecurity in Asia should be maintained by Asians

Figure 1 Share of GDP in Defence Spending by the USA, China and India



Source: Smith (2016).

themselves' (McCaughrin, 2017). He rejected outside interference in Asia, especially the continuous US involvement in the region, and stressed the key role of Asians for building an Asian security architecture themselves.

Meanwhile, Indo-US collaboration has been increasing. Although India has also intensified its security and defence alignments with Japan and Australia, these are already US allies in the IPR. India and Japan deepened their defence and security cooperation and upgraded it to a treaty of 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' during the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India in August 2017 (Gady, 2017). In addition, India has also increased its defence and security partnership with Australia, while Canberra decided to supply uranium to Indian nuclear power plants in the IPR. Evidently, India takes increasingly keen interest in geostrategic and defence cooperation with the USA and its pacific allies to enhance an India-friendly balance of power in the region. Beijing, in turn, continues to construct ports in a circle of the IPR under the 'String of Pearls' policy, which solidifies Chinese geostrategic claims throughout the region. As indicated, India is considering these port development projects by China as a major maritime security threat.

Therefore, convergence of maritime security interests among the USA, India, Japan, Australia and ASEAN alliance partners encouraged all these countries towards constructing a new regional security architecture. On 6 July 2017, India completed its Malabar maritime exercise with Japan and the USA in the Bay of Bengal. This was the first naval exercise in history in which the three countries used a naval carrier from each navy. The Indian Navy sent INS Vikramaditya, the USA Navy used their Nimitz supercarrier and the Japanese JS Izumo carrier completed the Malabar exercise in 2017 (Panda, 2017). Quite visibly, strengthened security and defence partnership in Indo-US relations are also increasing confidence building among other stakeholders such as Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries in the region.

Future Risk Analysis

After India and the USA signed the bilateral LEMOA in October 2016 and COMCASA in September 2018, emphasising the facilitation of additional defence opportunities for practical engagement and exchange (Pubby, 2018), this has fortified the Indo-US defence partnership for the coming decades. It seems to move towards a new regional security nexus, seeking to strengthen the enhanced new regional security architecture in the IPR. The Trump administration, too, has shown commitment towards this new geostrategic configuration to balance Chinese assertiveness in the region, and thus it contributes to this security convergence with India. As observed earlier, the Trump–Modi connection seems to intensify their geostrategic proximity in opposing non-traditional security threats, including narco-terrorism, human trafficking and sea piracy (Kronstadt & Pinto, 2013). As Trump has found India a useful new geostrategic partner together with Japan, South Korea and other ASEAN allies, both Trump and Modi have come forward in equal proportions to

challenge a China-centric Asian security architecture. Both seem to be looking forward to a grand strategic alliance with other regional powers such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and their ASEAN alliances in the IPR. Related to this enhanced new geostrategic, geoeconomic, security and defence proximity in Indo-US bilateral relations, however, there are also risks ahead.

The significance of a proclivity towards personality cult in the nature of leadership style of both Trump and Modi may emerge as a common defining feature in Indo-US relations, or it may lead to divergent views between 'America First' and 'India First' policies. There is also a future risk that while Indo-US bilateral relations are increasingly reliant on India's search for 'strategic autonomy' in internal and external affairs, especially in the IPR, US policymakers will struggle to control how India deals with its strategic affairs and security concerns. For instance, India has recently purchased the S-400 missile defence system from Russia without consulting the USA.

The future of Indo-US proximity also depends on China's rise and its dealing with neighbouring countries, especially India, Japan and ASEAN countries in the South China Sea disputes. In this respect, the USA found India as a rising power in the IPR and a useful global strategic partner, with the potential to counterbalance China's rise in the Asian Century. However, India's policymakers, aware about China's rise and US reservations, are giving mature responses, including arrangement of an informal summit in Wuhan in 2018 by Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping to normalise existing Himalayan border tensions. After all, together with Brazil, Russia and South Africa, India and China are major trading partners in the context of BRICS. Both China and India have also developed closer understanding about the multipolar world order in various stages and contexts, using BRICS, SCO and other economic institutions to counter a unilateral US-centric position. In that regard, reflecting the movement towards the Asian Century, India will tend to side with China, rather than allowing a major external party to continue its domination.

India's thrust for a multipolar Asian Century rather than US or Chinese dominance in the Asian Century may thus lead to increased future suspicions and risks for Indo-US bilateral relations. Although both India and the USA have similar policies towards the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture and are concerned about Chinese domination, India stands for an inclusive Indo-Pacific regional cooperation, rather than a US-led club of limited Indo-Pacific democracies. Not unfamiliar, thus, India is showing a preference for some kind of non-alignment and displays aversion against being controlled by others. At the same time, it remains willing to be a part of an alliance system in the region and is prepared to take on a mediating and balancing role between the USA and China in the region.

Conclusions

Overall, it is evident that 'hitherto unexpected progress has been made' (Fair, 2009: 158) in India-US relations and both India and the USA 'have developed a more

sophisticated comprehension of each other's complex bureaucracies' (Fair, 2009: 160), allowing a positive outlook. Future Indo-US relations may be strengthened further due to the multidimensional convergence of interests concerning geostrategic, geopolitical and economic agenda and the two countries' shared concerns about traditional and non-traditional security threats in the IPR. India needs the US geostrategic partnership in the region to strengthen its hands vis-a-vis China. The USA also needs India's crucial geostrategic support in the region to counteract China's rise as an emergent global superpower with many stakes all over the vast Asian continent. Despite some future risks, increasingly strong Indo-US bilateral relations are thus forming a solid cornerstone of an enhanced Indo-Pacific regional security architecture. The convergence of shared Indo-US geostrategic, geopolitical, economic, security and defence interests will probably remain a defining axis in redesigning the contours of the maritime future in the Asian Century. However, in a global context, this cannot be exclusively Asian, nor purely bilateral, given the huge interconnections between the visibly converging parameters of interest of several major countries with a stake in the IPR.

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