



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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High Hopes: India's Response to U.S. Security Policies

M O H A N M A L I K

Executive Summary

- Compared with America's traditional allies, India has been much more supportive and understanding of the Bush administration's policy initiatives on missile defense, arms control, the International Criminal Court, and the UN role in the management of international security challenges.
- India welcomes the Bush administration's plans for a greater Indian role in a wider Asian security system so as to create a strategically stable Asia.
- As a non-status-quo power, India appears more sympathetic than France or China to the American effort to rework the rules of the global game. India wants to work with the U.S. in shaping a new world order that must be constructed amidst the dissolution of the old.
- On controversial issues such as missile defense and the war against Iraq, the Vajpayee government's stance is dictated primarily by the pragmatic consideration of sustaining improvement in U.S.-Indian ties and avoiding alignment with anti-U.S. forces.
- The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 proved to be a catalyst in improving U.S.-Indian ties, but also complicated them. For example, the war on terrorism has highlighted differences of definitions, sources, and approaches to fighting terrorism.
- Indian officials increasingly speak of the disconnect between India's expectations of the U.S. and what Washington is able and willing to deliver with regard to terrorist infiltration into Kashmir from Pakistan. Indians believe Washington will have to rethink its strategy if the global campaigns against terrorism and WMD proliferation are to be won decisively.
- Even as "the China factor" increasingly draws the U.S. and India closer, "the Pakistan factor" pulls them apart.

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The Bush administration took office with the objective of “transforming relations with India” to face new security challenges (such as China’s rise, Islamist extremism, terrorism and nuclear proliferation). When President Bush unveiled his missile defense plan on May 1, 2001, New Delhi responded far more positively than did most U.S. allies. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 proved to be a catalyst in bilateral ties and resulted in a significant increase in the number of high-level visits, military-to-military engagements, and cooperative initiatives. The Bush administration’s perception of India’s role was clearly spelled out in the new U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) released in September 2002:

U.S. interests require a strong relationship with India. We are the two largest democracies, committed to political freedoms protected by representative Government. India is moving toward greater economic freedom as well. We have a common interest in the free flow of commerce, including through the vital sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean. Finally, we share an interest in fighting terrorism and in creating a strategically stable Asia.

The NSS acknowledged that differences remain on India’s nuclear and missile programs and pace of economic reform. The Bush administration’s plans for India, as laid out in the NSS and other official statements, were very well received by the Indian government and security policy community. The Indians particularly see the suspension of sanctions on technology transfer as a sign of U.S. confidence and trust in the relationship that confirms American understanding of India’s strategic importance in Asia.

Nonetheless, the path of what India’s Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee calls “natural allies” is still littered with several obstacles, especially the revived post-9/11 U.S.-Pakistan relationship, differences on the Kashmir issue, expectations about the war on terrorism, nuclear/missile issues, policies toward Iran, energy security, and the pace of India’s economic reforms. Some of the tensions can be attributed to the fact that this is very much a relationship of unequals: the United States is a global power with global interests and responsibilities whereas India is a regional power with regional interests. More than anything else, “the Pakistan factor” continues to cast a dark shadow on the future of U.S.-India ties.

MISSILE DEFENSES

India’s careful receptivity to President Bush’s Missile Defense (MD) initiative of May 2001, even as long-time U.S. allies — Japan and South Korea — dithered, came as yet another reminder of the distance New Delhi had travelled since the collapse of its Cold War ally, the Soviet Union. However, India’s initial nuanced but generally favorable response became somewhat muted in subsequent statements following public criticism of pro-U.S. tilt. India hoped an MD shield would obviate the necessity of spending huge amounts of money into building offensive missile capability and neutralize the “offensive nuclear/missile strategies” of China and Pakistan. The Indian government views the missile defense technology transfer as a test case in the evolving U.S.-Indian defense relationship. U.S. and Indian officials have been holding regular MD-related discussions on possible Indian participation in missile defense programs.

However, the very first initiative to forge closer U.S.-India security cooperation via missile defense soon got bogged down in India-Pakistan balance-of-power considerations and U.S. bureaucratic wrangling when India indicated an interest in purchasing the U.S.-aided Israeli Arrow anti-ballistic missile system. As the Arrow is a jointly developed U.S.-Israeli system, U.S. permission is needed before the sale can proceed. Pakistan opposes the sale to India on the grounds that a missile defense system would shift the power balance in India's favor. While the Pentagon supports the sale, the Department of State has not granted clearance fearing it would destabilize India-Pakistan relations and possibly contravene the 1987 Missile Technology Control Regime. Similar episodes will strengthen the argument of those in India who are skeptical about the prospects of significant U.S. defense sales to India.

GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM (GWOT)

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks served to highlight common security interests and added further impetus to U.S.-India ties. India's swift and prompt offer of its full support to the U.S.-led war on terror — including intelligence on the al-Qaeda network, overflight rights, refueling and repair of U.S. military aircraft, port facilities in Bombay and Cochin for U.S. naval vessels, and search-and-rescue missions — surprised both American officials and long-time India-watchers. New Delhi obviously hoped the terrorist attacks would make the U.S. more understanding of India's own two-decade-long fight against terrorism. Washington responded by suspending sanctions that were imposed in response to India's 1998 nuclear tests and military-to-military links were restored. However, Pakistan's geo-strategic location and the fact that Operation "Enduring Freedom" was to be prosecuted by the U.S. Central Command meant that the U.S. could not make full use of the facilities and capabilities that India (which comes under U.S. Pacific Command) offered. India's most important contribution to the war effort was sharing escort duty for high-value shipping through the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean.

The Indian government was disappointed when the U.S. rejected its demand for extending such patrolling to the Strait of Hormuz apparently under pressure from Islamabad. India feels slighted and uneasy over Pakistan's new relationship with the U.S. because in many ways what happens on the Indian subcontinent is unavoidably a zero-sum game. Furthermore, New Delhi soon found out that its initial optimism about gaining Washington's sympathy and support for anti-terrorist operations against Pakistan-based extremist organizations was misplaced. As tensions flared sharply between India and Pakistan first after the December 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and then after the May 14, 2002 attack on a military base in Jammu, New Delhi responded by massing troops on the India-Pakistan border and warned of retaliatory, punitive military strikes against terrorist camps inside Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. High-level U.S. diplomatic efforts led to the banning of three Pakistan-based jihadi organizations, and more importantly, yielded a promise from General Musharraf in June 2002 to stop permanently terrorist incursions into Indian-held Kashmir. However, the continuing infiltration and acts of terror dashed India's hopes and eroded the U.S. credibility to deliver on its assurances with regard to Pakistan. Senior Indian ministers publicly complain that the GWOT is neither global nor a war on terror but an American offensive against anti-American forces that has been defined purely in terms of U.S. geo-strategic and energy security interests. As recently as March 3, 2003, Prime Minister Vajpayee talked about the

disconnect between India's expectations of the U.S. and what Washington is able and willing to deliver with regard to terrorist infiltration across the Line of Control in Kashmir: "If the United States can't make Pakistan keep its promise [to halt cross-border terrorism], it shows its weakness...If assurances given to us are not honored, we will factor this in while formulating our policy in the future."

Despite these disappointments, India knows it stands to gain a great deal from the loss of Pakistan's "strategic depth" in Afghanistan with the collapse of the Taliban. India's policy establishment sees Central Asia and the Persian Gulf as a region for bilateral cooperation with the U.S. in the areas of energy security, democratic transformation in the Islamic world, and counter-terrorism. Interestingly, the only thing that arch-rivals India and Pakistan now agree on is that the United States should remain strategically engaged in the region. Both India and U.S. agree that a moderate and modern Pakistan is in the best interest of South Asia and the world. Yet, while the U.S. believes that Pakistan is moving in that direction, India remains skeptical. India also worries that a stronger Pakistan, aided by the United States, Europe, Japan and international financial institutions, would not only be better able to contain India but also continue its hostile policies.

In short, despite shared security concerns regarding terrorism, GWOT has highlighted differences on definitions (regional versus international), sources (e.g., India is adamant that Pakistan is part of the problem, not part of the solution), and approaches to fighting terrorism. For its part, Washington was none too pleased when India appropriated the Bush administration's doctrine of preemption. The public airing of disenchantment with the U.S. notwithstanding, no one expects a major backward slide in bilateral ties. The Indians argue that Bush's confidence in Musharraf's "unstinted support" in the GWOT is misplaced, and that Washington will eventually turn to New Delhi for the simple reason that "Pakistan remains the epicenter of both terrorism and WMD proliferation." Moreover, New Delhi expects Islamabad's military alliance with China to cause additional frictions and tensions in U.S.-Pakistan ties in the event of deterioration in Sino-U.S. relations.

"AXIS OF EVIL" AND THE WAR AGAINST IRAQ

India did not react favorably to President Bush's characterization of North Korea, Iran and Iraq as the "Axis of Evil" in his State of the Union address in January 2002. India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha argued that going by the "Axis of Evil" criteria (militarist regimes, track record in promoting extremism, terrorism and proliferation, hostility to the U.S. and its allies), Pakistan, not Iran, should have been included in the axis. New Delhi has commercial ties with Iran and has recently stepped up its security cooperation with Teheran both to secure access to energy resources and to establish alternative railroad links to Afghanistan via Iran's Chah Bahar port.

As for Iraq, Indian leaders initially voiced their opposition to any unilateral operation against Baghdad, stating their preference for a UN-backed action. New Delhi, however, quickly tempered its stand by merely emphasizing the negative economic consequences of the U.S. war against Iraq and potential destabilization of the Middle East for its own 150 million-strong Muslim population, oil prices and millions of Indian expatriate workers in the region, without resorting to the moralizing tone and hectoring that characterized India's opposition in the past. At the Non-Aligned Summit in Malaysia in February 2003, Prime Minister Vajpayee insisted on taking a "middle path" and refused to toe the "no-war" line. Faced with a NATO split and UN Security Council deadlock over

Iraq, Bush phoned Vajpayee in early March and called on India to join the “coalition of the willing” and provide logistical support. Given its desire to sustain the improvement in U.S.-Indian relations, the Vajpayee government believes that since India cannot do anything to oppose the U.S. on Iraq, it may as well stay out of its way — a pragmatic stance similar to the one India had earlier taken on the MD issue. Consequently, India’s response to the war against Iraq has gradually shifted from “no” to a regime-change in Iraq, to “yes” to a UN-backed war, and finally to a quiet “yes” to the U.S. while publicly voicing opposition to the war largely for domestic political reasons. Some Indian strategic analysts even see India benefiting from the U.S. push for political modernization so as to defeat extremism and its ideological sources.

TOWARD POST-UN MULTILATERALISM?

Unlike the Chinese, French and Russians, Indians do not seem to mind a world where America is the sole superpower. Nor is India too nervous about Washington’s growing unilateralism in world affairs. Influential opinionmakers argue that if India plays its card well, it might benefit from the tectonic changes underway in geopolitics and enhance its standing on the international stage. Some Indian strategic analysts see the war against Iraq as “a defining moment that will set the stage for a reordering of the international security system,” and “alter the nature of global institutions as well as reconstitute the hierarchy of great powers.” They argue that India has no reason to mourn the passage of the old world order as it was kept out of its decision-making structures and denied a place at the high table (read, UN Security Council). As a rising, non-status-quo power, India certainly appears more sympathetic to the American effort to redefine the rules of the global game than France or China which have emerged as defenders of the present world order. A noted strategic affairs analyst, C. Raja Mohan, explained in *The Hindu*, September 26, 2002:

The current European criticisms of the American approach to international relations today echo many of the arguments that India used to employ in the past. That should have drawn India and Europe closer on global political issues. But it has not. At precisely the moment the Europeans are emboldened to criticise the U.S., India believes that it cannot jeopardise the budding strategic partnership with America. As a result, India has been far less critical than Europe of the U.S. policy on Iraq and less insistent on a multilateral route. At a moment when Europe proclaims that power politics is passé, India is beginning to de-emphasise the notion of collective security and stressing the importance of comprehensive national strength and balance of power ... As the biggest victim of international terrorism, India is more enthusiastic than Europe about the American war since September 11.

It is in this context that India’s support for the Bush administration’s stance on a range of controversial issues — missile defense, rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, limitations on the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and the UN role in the management of international security challenges — needs to be understood.

DOCTRINE OF INTEGRATION

The Bush administration has asserted America's responsibility in promoting democracy, civil liberties, equal justice, religious tolerance, and the rule of law throughout the world under the "doctrine of integration." The Administration explicitly named India among those countries slated for new partnership with the United States as both share fundamental democratic values. Though official India has not reacted to the "integration" doctrine, most Indians acknowledge that democracy provides a solid foundation for a strong Indo-U.S. strategic partnership and extol the virtue of spreading democratic values. Alliances based on interests are more transient, they say, whereas partnerships based on shared values and ideals can be more durable. The American integration project for the reformation of the Islamic world is of great interest to India because it could eventually contribute toward the internal transformation of Pakistan. Nonetheless, the U.S. rhetoric about democratic values also engenders cynicism and skepticism among the Indians, who see Washington as not practicing what it preaches in Pakistan. In the GWOT, the Bush administration is viewed by many Indians as having already subordinated "integration" or democracy promotion to immediate concerns like military base access from unsavory governments.

PROLIFERATION AND INTERVENTION

A long-time critic of the United States' attitude toward Chinese nuclear and missile proliferation, India saw the release of National Strategy to Combat WMD in December 2002 as an attempt to lock the stable-door after the horses have bolted. When Pakistan came in the firing line about the "missiles-for-nukes" barter deal with North Korea, an Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman said that blame should also be put on China for making Pakistan a nuclear weapons state. For, Pakistan's nuclear weapons exports to North Korea not only endanger U.S. security interests in East Asia, but also raise the likelihood of nuclear weapons/materials/know-how being passed on to the al-Qaeda terrorists. Reacting to Richard Haas' admonition in his January 14, 2003 speech to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service that "[w]hen regimes with a history of aggression and support for terrorism seek WMD...they jeopardize their immunity from intervention, including anticipatory action to destroy this developing capability," one Indian analyst remarked that it ought to apply more to Pakistan than to Iraq or North Korea.

THE CHINA CHALLENGE AND ASIAN SECURITY

Both U.S. and India have similar geo-strategic concerns about China's growing power and influence. For India, which has long regarded China as a strategic adversary, the Bush administration's characterization of China as a "strategic competitor" rather than as a strategic partner was a welcome development. However, both the U.S and India try to play down "the China factor" claiming their new relationship is based on a wide range of factors, including economics, trade, maritime security, anti-terrorism, nonproliferation and shared democratic values.

The geographical concept of an “East Asian littoral,” defined “as the region stretching from south of Japan to through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal” articulated first in the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), released on September 30, 2001, gives importance to Asian friends such as India beyond traditional allies Japan and South Korea and dovetails nicely with India’s own “Look East” policy. The QDR characterizes Asia as “emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition” with a “volatile mix of rising and declining regional powers.” Avoiding naming the obvious challenger, China, the Pentagon warns of the possibility that “a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region,” adding that the lower “density of U.S. basing” in this “critical region places a premium on securing additional access and infrastructure agreements.” In this context, it is significant that U.S.-India strategic engagement has scaled new heights with the announcement of a series of measures usually reserved for close U.S. allies and friends: joint military exercises in Alaska that would boost India’s high-altitude warfare capabilities in the Himalayan glaciers of northern Kashmir; sale of military hardware including radars, aircraft engines and surveillance equipment to India; joint naval exercises and the training of India’s special forces; and intelligence sharing and naval patrols in the Straits of Malacca.

Some in the U.S. see a strong India serving Washington’s long-term interests by ensuring that there be countervailing powers in Asia that prevent the domination of the region by any one power and ensure a stable balance of power by avoiding too much concentration of power in one Asian power. Unlike Japan, India avoids any formal alliance with the United States partly because of concern that a pro-U.S. tilt will prompt the Chinese to tighten their embrace of India’s neighbours and partly because there remains a very strong undercurrent of suspicion and fear that Washington is a fickle and not-so-reliable partner and that American priorities and policies vis-à-vis China might change in the future to the detriment of India’s strategic interests. Notwithstanding India’s desire to remain an independent power, which sometimes results in India’s taking policy positions contrary to the U.S., India has made it clear that it intends to challenge China’s dominance in Asia via its “Look East” strategy which seeks to enhance military and economic cooperation with “China-wary nations” in the Asia-Pacific (the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Iran). Should Russia and China (with the backing of France or Germany) formalize an alliance to counter the U.S.-led bloc, the logic of geopolitics would pull the United States toward a strong alliance with India so as to offset Sino-Russian power and influence in Eurasia. As old relationships cool, new ones will be formed. In the meantime, India welcomes the Bush administration’s plans for a greater India’s involvement in a wider Asian security system to balance an economically booming China and stagnant Japan.

On balance, U.S.-Indian relations have witnessed a dramatic upswing under the Bush administration, but they are still at an embryonic stage. Compared with America’s traditional allies, India has been much more supportive and understanding of the Bush administration’s policy initiatives. While strategic ties are flourishing, economic links remain weak. Ambassador Robert Blackwill recently described U.S. exports to India and investment flows as being “flat as chapatti [flatbread].” Washington’s preoccupations with the war on terror and Iraq have tended to push into the background the effort to fashion an overall strategic framework for advancing U.S.-Indian interests in Asia. India’s enthusiasm has dimmed after Pakistan returned to the affections of the U.S. post-9/11. While “the China factor” draws the U.S. and India closer, “the Pakistan factor” pulls them

apart. There is a great deal of skepticism, suspicion and wariness on the Indian side. Also, much of the improvement has taken place under the aegis of a pro-U.S. Bharatiya Janata Party-led government and doubts remain about the future should Congress Party or a left-wing coalition come to power in New Delhi. Their common long-term strategic interests and shared values notwithstanding, both sides need to work hard to ensure that the U.S. and India remain “engaged democracies” and do not revert to being “estranged democracies” again.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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